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THE RIVAL GIANTS OF NOWHAR

OR, The Brothers' League.

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AUTHOR OF "THE DIAMOND HOAX," "YANKEE
VIDOCO'S DISCOVERY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. GIANT VS. GIANT.

"HEUR me, pilgrims, w'ile my royal trump
does sound; list ye to th' kingly edict!

"I, Shasta Sam, proclaim myself King of No-
whar!"

The huge form of the speaker loomed up in the
doorway of the Fair Play, the principal saloon
and gambling-hell of the isolated Idaho mining-
camp of Nowhar.

Each of his brawny hands clasped the shining
gold butt of a heavy self-cocking revolver, the



"SO YOU ARE GOLD GABE, KING OF NOWHAR, ARE YOU?" HE GRATED, HIS BURNING
EYES NEVER WAVERING IN THEIR HATEFUL STARE.

hammers of which were half raised by the pressure of his long forefingers on the triggers, as he glared fiercely at the motley group at the bar and on beyond at the throng surrounding the gaming-tables.

His full, deep tones rung through the long room with startling suddenness, drawing more than mere cursory glances from its inmates, accustomed to that particular style of rodomontade as they were.

And Shasta Sam, of Cinnabar, as the newcomer had introduced himself, was truly worthy of more than a passing glance.

In height and build a giant, yet an ideal of grace and symmetry, with a kingly head, dark, finely-molded face adorned by drooping jetty mustaches, large and keen black eyes, he would have attracted attention anywhere and under any circumstances.

His garb was of purple velvet of the finest texture; his linen immaculate; his weapons of the latest and best pattern, heavily plated with gold. He looked every inch the dashing, reckless sport from the crown of his jauntily worn silk hat to the soles of his glossy patent-leather boots.

There was an insolent, taunting ring in his deep, powerful tones that seemed to challenge each individual Nowharite within hearing to dispute his right to the title he had just assumed.

A full score of hands leaped to ever-ready weapons; half a hundred pairs of eyes stared straight at the vaunting sport.

"Heur me, pilgrims," he repeated, returning look for look with savage interest; "I, Shasta Sam, of Cinnabar, proclaim myself King of Nowhar! You ov th' common herd must crawl where I walk!"

Mechanically, almost every eye turned from the boastful giant to the central figure amid the group at the bar, a personage of striking physique.

The exact counterpart of Shasta Sam in height, build and feature, he was a perfect blonde, with eyes of sparkling blue, and long, curling hair and mustaches of a bright golden color. In dress, too, there was a remarkable resemblance, the only difference being that while the self-styled King of Nowhar was clad in purple this man was garbed in black velvet.

A mocking laugh, irritating in its peculiar softness, followed swift upon the giant's loud words, and the Hercules of the golden locks, setting down his glass of beaded liquor untasted, dropped his broad white palms upon the revolver butts protruding from his belt and strode directly toward the man from Cinnabar.

"An exalted perch, truly, is this upon which you propose to roost, gentle Shanghai!" he exclaimed, in smooth, unruffled tones, halting within three paces of Shasta Sam, while the mocking smile deepened on his full red lips. "We galoots ov Nowhar are a generous set, and I doubt not that if you remove th' single obstacle in your way and read your title clear th' sportive sports at my back will bow th' knee and acknowledge you their most high and mighty sovereign; yea, will even prostrate themselves in th' dust that lordly King Shanghai may not soil his dainty hoofs in ascending his coveted roost.

"But, my long-drawn-out friend, first remove th' obstacle, and prove your right to th' royal perch, or th' aforesaid gents ov Nowhar may take it into their fun-loving heads to reverse your order ov things and p'sonify even thy lordly form.

"In other words, as th' cultured Bostonian probably wouldn't say, they may climb gently up your frame and amble gracefully on your neck.

"You see, Shanghai, th' obstacle in your way is simply this, and nothing more: Nowhar has a king; that king is th' alcalde; th' alcalde is Gold Gabe; and—I blush from sheer modesty to say it—I am Gold Gabe.

"And I haven't abdicated as yet in favor of anybody, nor have I th' remotest idea of so doing. If you are really and truly pining to be a mighty monarch, I would advise you, as a friend and a brother, amble on to some other man's town.

"Nowhar is a live camp, but she isn't big enough to hold two such men as you and I, Shanghai."

Lightly, jeeringly, in mock-heroic accents, the words had fallen from the full red lips of the golden-haired giant, visibly goading Shasta Sam almost to madness. Yet, carelessly as he had spoken, those who stood near enough fancied they could detect in the depths of Gold Gabe's brilliant blue eyes a lurid gleam of jealousy.

The dark Hercules moved slightly forward as the contemptuous, mocking tones of the "alcalde" ceased, his black eyes glowing with rage,

the hammers of his gold-mounted revolvers moving ominously back and forth under the varying pressure of the long white fingers on the triggers.

"So you are Gold Gabe, King of Nowhar, are you?" he grated, his burning eyes never wavering in their hateful stare.

"I have once so stated, Shanghai," softly uttered Nowhar's alcalde. "If my word is not enough, perhaps some of the gentlemen behind me can bear me out in what I have said."

The "gentlemen" in question, as rough a set as any other mining-camp in all Idaho could boast, perhaps, had discreetly betaken themselves to one side of the long room, out of range of any stray "outcroppings" of lead. They were posted in some of the alcalde's little peculiarities—knew that when his voice was at its softest his anger was deadliest.

"I reckon thar's no need ov any of th' galoots to chip into our little game," slowly enunciated the man from Cinnabar. "If you say you are King ov Nowhar, it simply brings you to th' scratch, that is all."

Again that mocking, insulting laugh rippled from the alcalde's lips.

The red light in the black eyes of the dark Hercules deepened; but he went on, steadily:

"It brings you to the scratch, that is all. I have sought and found you, you monumental fraud. Th' name and fame ov Gold Gabe, King ov Nowhar, have spread far and wide through th' hills. A mountain mogul you have grown to be from th' mean coyote ov a sneak thief and card sharp th' camps ov th' Stanislaus once knew, to their sorrow, Buzzard Bill."

The thrust seemed to tell, for the alcalde, covered as he was by the muzzles of the two revolvers, crouched as if to spring forward and fasten his fingers upon the throat of the man from Cinnabar.

"Squirm, ye carrion-reekin' vulture!" uttered Shasta Sam, a grim smile breaking the sternness of his face for a brief, fleeting second. "Squirm, but don't you move so much as a finger in th' way ov drawin' a weapon, for I hold th' drop on you in a way you ought to despise, and I tell you I won't hesitate a half minute in sendin' you to meet th' on'y master you ever really served, th' old boy ov fire and brimstone fame."

"Squirm nothin'!" retorted the giant of the golden locks, grasping fiercely the butts of the revolvers he dared not attempt to draw. "When Gold Gabe backs water for rant and blow and bluster from such an overgrown chunk ov human cussedness as you, Shanghai, Nowhar'll have need ov a new alcalde, for I swear I'd hang myself to th' nearest tree."

"If th' blind critter known as Justice ever gets her dues, you'll disfigure th' landscape in just that way, on'y good Judge Lynch will have a finger in the pie," said the man from Cinnabar, calmly.

Gold Gabe laughed—a grim, sardonic laugh, utterly devoid of mirth.

Those who knew the alcalde best fancied the dark Hercules's words had struck home.

"A nice critter, you, to talk ov Judge Lynch," sneered Gold Gabe. "Why, you black-nozzled shark, your face alone would be enough to convict you ov half th' crimes in th' decalogue before any honest jury th' country can scare up. You caught th' drop on me in th' meanest kind ov a sneakin' way, too, and, onless you've experienced th' biggest kind ov a change ov heart since we last met on th' Stanislaus, I reckon you're mighty apt to use your advantage. You see I know you, you gainly galoot; down thar you were 'way-down Bummer Bob, too lazy and shiftless to wash, too cowardly to gather toll on th' highway. But lo! th' filth and rags have vanished! How art th' lowly risen! Whose blood paid for th' agony you're pilin' on, Bummer Bob?"

As the jeering words burst forth, the bronzed face of Shasta Sam grew dark and lowering; his blazing eyes flashed fitfully; the slowly-moving hammers of his ready revolvers leaped back until they were almost upon a poise, requiring but a hair's weight against the triggers to hurl the soul of the blonde giant into eternity.

Staring straight into the glowing orbs of the man from Cinnabar, Gold Gabe again uttered that soft, insolent, irritating laugh, courting death swift and sure.

A low murmur broke from the roughs and toughs, miners, sports and speculators grouped at the side of the long room. The alcalde's "sand" had grown into a proverb in the camp of Nowhar; but just now the magistratic giant seemed bent upon eclipsing his previous record at the hazard of his life.

And there were men there who, secretly or openly inimical to the alcalde, waited with

bated breath for the outcome of the strange broil, exultant in the belief that Gold Gabe had at last met a Roman fully as noble as himself.

Slightly apart from his fellows, with his arms folded carelessly across his broad chest, a polished revolver gleaming in each hand, a cold smile on his immobile face, and a strange glitter in his big blue eyes, stood the Apollo-like proprietor of the Fair Play, Julian St. Elmo.

Between this handsome sport and Gold Gabe there was anything but love. It was, therefore, with deep interest that he watched the two giants, knowing full well that the controversy must have a tragic ending, and that the alcalde would doubtless end his days then and there.

"Don't stack it on too high—don't crowd me too hard," warned Shasta Sam, in tones of suppressed fury, as King Gabe's mocking laugh died away. "Every man has his faults, his ups and downs, in this world. I have, and have had, mine, and I reckon you could say as much, if you were honest enough. Just now, you're away up at th' top-notch; but you're comin' down, and when I'm done with you thar'll be a new king in Nowhar."

"Down on the Stanislaus, when night was at its blackest, you, Buzzard Bill, cowardly, thievish coyote that you are, murdered my pard, Monterey Merle—as white a man as ever set hoof in th' mines—for th' sake ov a few ounces ov yellow dust! I swore I'd find you, and that oath has made a man ov me. It's taken me five long years to hunt you down; but I've got you hard and fast this time, for you poked your fool head straight into th' jaws ov th' trap I set for you when I entered this place."

"What have you got to say for yourself, you cowardly assassin?"

"That it is a lie—simply and purely a lie—hatched by you, you overgrown loafer!" hotly returned the alcalde, gnawing savagely at his nether lip. "It's a cock-and-bull story for which you can't produce a word ov proof. If—"

"Hold, right thar!" tersely interrupted Shasta Sam. "I happen to have th' dyin' statement ov Monterey Merle, th' man you stabbed in th' back, then robbed, and I reckon that's proof, fast enough. If it's not, then th' galoots ov Nowhar must be common hogs."

The alcalde, starting slightly, remained silent, gazing on beyond the man from Cinnabar into the darkness without the open door, a strange, half-puzzled, half-expectant expression on his face.

Thrown off his guard, apparently, Shasta Sam allowed the muzzles of his revolvers to sink, and cast a swift look over his shoulder.

In that brief instant, ere a sharp cry from Julian St. Elmo could warn the dark Hercules of his peril, Gold Gabe whipped a revolver from his belt, flung his hand straight out, and fired!

The report stung through the room with strange force.

Uttering a low groan, Shasta Sam dropped his weapons, staggered forward, and fell in an inert heap on the floor, the blood trickling in a tiny stream from a bullet-hole in his head.

Instantly all was confusion.

CHAPTER II.

AN ASSASSIN'S SHOT

FOR a single instant after the report of his trusty revolver had died away Gold Gabe stood like a bronze statue, every sinew in his superb form drawn to its utmost tension, his handsome face a gray, ashy hue, his steel-blue eyes dilated with horror.

Straight out the open door he stared, his brawny arm extended, his hard white hand claspings with almost despairing fierceness the gold butt of his heavy revolver, up from the deadly muzzle of which still curled a wreath of pale bluish smoke.

Then, above the almost infernal din that broke forth, arose the voice of Julian St. Elmo, cold, clear and ringing:

"Gentlemen, it was murder—the desperate act of a cowardly assassin brought to bay. Alcalde though he is, he must not escape just and speedy punishment. The reputation of Nowhar is at stake, as well as that of my establishment!"

There was a ring of exultation in the tones of the handsome sport that passed undetected by all save Gold Gabe himself.

Reluctantly tearing his gaze from the fateful doorway, through which he longed to dash, but dared not, the blonde giant allowed his burning eyes to dwell one brief instant on the prostrate, bleeding form of the dark Hercules, while something wondrously like a deep sob seemed almost to rend his massive chest; then, with tempestuous fury, swaying and quivering in his passion like a storm-blown oak, he wheeled and faced Julian

St. Elmo, to find the cool, calculating sport's revolvers leveled at his heart.

"This is *your* work, St. Elmo, and, by the Eternal, you shall pay for it, you cold-blooded hound!" he hoarsely enunciated, voice, words, and manner plainly revealing his intense hatred of the gambler. "The shot that laid *him* low came from the darkness out thar, and was intended for *me*, was fired by one of *your* hired assassins. "Quick, boys"—with an appealing glance at his friends in the excited crowd—"quick! th' murderous wretch is still lurking thar in th' darkness. Five thousand dollars to th' man that captures him, dead or alive!"

A wild yell burst from the crowd, and a score of men at once surged toward the door, eager to prove the truth of the alcalde's assertion.

Gold Gabe was not without friends; then, too, the munificent reward was a powerful incentive to the gold-seekers.

A cold, cynical smile flitted over Julian St. Elmo's face, as with a swift, sidelong glance he noted the exodus of the man-hunters. Then his eyes turned to meet the searching gaze of the alcalde.

"You seem to overlook the fact that your own weapon exploded the instant it reached a level, King Gabe, and that that was the only report heard," he remarked, sneeringly.

"There's no two ways about it, my gentle alcalde; *you* killed the big stranger, and I reckon you've got to suffer for it. Under your iron rule, you've carried things with a high hand in Nowhar long enough, and the cunning ruse your quick wit suggested won't save your bacon this time."

"I overlook nothing," hotly retorted the giant of the golden locks. "I did pull trigger, I admit, but not at that poor lump of clay. It was one of *your* heelers, Jule St. Elmo, that I tried to wing, and I think I succeeded, too. I sighted him skulking in the darkness out thar, just as he drew a bead on me, and tried a snapshot in return. Our weapons cracked together."

"A likely yarn, that, alcalde," observed the gambler, sarcastically, yet with an undercurrent of uneasiness in his tones. "Do you expect us to swallow that in its entirety, or is it to be taken in homeopathic doses? You say, too, that this lurking assassin was a heeler of mine—have you any proof of such a fact?"

The crisp response Gold Gabe was about to utter was cut off by a sudden outburst of shouts and yells from the searchers outside. The next minute the motley crew came surging through the doorway, its leaders dragging in their relentless grasp the cause of all the tumult.

"Reckon I'll hev ter claim that leetle five thousand, King Gabe," shouted the foremost, a brawny red-shirted miner, who, in that camp at least, answered to the euphonious appellation of Sweet By-and-By.

As he spoke, the red-shirt half-pushed, half-dragged into full view as odd a specimen of humanity as it had ever fallen to the lot of any present to come in contact with.

A mountain tramp it was who writhed and twisted in the strong grasp of Sweet By-and-By—a Yankee of uncertain age, tall and preternaturally lank, with a thin, beardless face, and shrewd gray eyes. His dingy swallow-tail coat had been split two-thirds of the way up the back during the scuffle, and his battered white plug hat had been jammed down over his left eye, giving him the appearance peculiar to the unregenerate bum. One hand clutched the remains of what had once been a green gingham umbrella, the other the handle of a dilapidated carpet-bag.

"Yaas, King Gabe, I reckon I'll hev ter take *ther* dust," repeated Sweet By-and-By, pushing his captive forward. "Hyar's ther identical cuss wot plugged ther Shasta pilgrim. Gaze on him—his mug's enuff ter make pi'zen sick!"

"Plugged *nothin'*, yer towerin' monument of fraud an' *deception*!" snorted an indignant voice in the midst of the crowd hanging about the doorway. "Alcalde, yer can trot out yer yaller shekels. Hyar's ther ginooine simon-pure, lead-slinger, an' I'll leave it ter all ther galoots of Nowhar ef his face hain't enuff ter make a dead man git out of *ther* way. It's puffedly hidjus!"

Puffing and panting from his exertions, his honest face aglow with excitement, the speaker forced his captive across the rough floor.

The ludicrous appearance of the luckless Yankee was only heightened when he was brought into contrast with the "specimen" stoutly struggling in the grasp of gaunt grizzled Jeems Rivers—a short, fat, rotund figure, incased in clothing originally intended for a man of far less avoirdupois; a round, beardless red face, out of the center of which, from between the two

unusually full, puffy cheeks, peeped a yet redder pug nose; a pair of pale blue eyes; a shock of bristling straw-colored hair, almost white; a small, pursed-up mouth, and immense double chin; all in all, an indescribably comical, innocent-looking wanderer, far from his *lieb vaterland*.

"For heaven's sake, gentlemen, some of you go scare up the rest of the menagerie!" exclaimed Julian St. Elmo, in much astonishment, smiling coldly, exultantly.

The next instant he started back with a bitter oath, stripped of the advantage he had held over the alcalde; for shrewd Jeems Rivers, staunchest among Gold Gabe's adherents, had deftly whirled the stout form of his captive directly before the muzzles of the gambler's leveled weapons.

Then followed a swift movement upon the part of both St. Elmo and the alcalde.

The former uttered a sharp cry of rage.

"Keep cool, dainty sport!" softly murmured Gold Gabe, his brilliant blue eyes glowing hotly over the polished length of his revolver, the muzzle of which now bore full on the gambler's head. "Th' tables have turned, thanks to our mutual friend, honest Jeems Rivers. Yield up your weapons and we will call a truce until this affair is sifted to th' bottom; refuse, and I pledge you my word good Judge Lynch will will never get th' ghost of a chance to crack your soft white neck."

The crowd waited in deep suspense for the defiant answer the sport seemed about to fling back.

"Reckon you've got me in a corner this time, alcalde," at length observed Julian St. Elmo, slowly and with forced calmness, as he delivered his weapons into the keeping of one of his faro-dealers. "Fate is against me, and I yield with the best grace possible. When this side-issue is settled, we can have our little reckoning; but it galls me to throw up my hand when called by an over-grown two-legged coyote low down enough to work a trick as scurvy as the one you played on *him*," with a swift inclination of his handsome head toward the lifeless form of the dark Hercules.

The giant of the golden locks bowed, in sheer mockery.

"King Gabe, hyar's ther owdashus annymile yer want ter see," squeaked Sweet By-and-By, again pushing forward the Yankee, as the alcalde thrust his revolver into his belt and turned with an icy smile from the discomfited gambler.

"Git out! That whapper-jawed, flat-footed string of lankness hain't nerve enuff ter shoot off his mouth, say nothin' about a gun," growled Jeems Rivers, irascibly. "Why didn't yer lasso a he'llthy shadder, sweet 'un?—then yer *mought* hev stood sum' show fer ther money. Right hyar's ther bloody-minded Lucresha Borger wanted by ther alcalde."

Wheezing, gasping from the tightness of the miner's twisting grip in his collar, the helpless Teuton was whirled slowly around, like a mountain of fat on a rusty pivot, his red face growing yet redder, his short pug-nose gleaming like a miniature beacon-light below his twinkling, dim blue eyes.

An explosive burst of laughter escaped Sweet By-and-By, to be caught up by the careless throng, unmindful of the inanimate, bleeding form of Shasta Sam lying in a ghastly heap a few paces away.

"What! that kraut-vine fang a man in ther back!" snorted the Yankee's captor, in a shrill falsetto, an expression of unfeigned disgust spreading over his usually beaming face. "Jeems Rivers, yer're crazier than a rattler in dog-days! Hyar's ther sneakin' critter w'at slewed ther stranger-sport—a fact I'll gamble on!"

And Sweet By-and-By, highly indignant at the imputation that the alcalde's reward was not for him, brought his heavy hand down upon his captive's back with a slap that made the Yankee's teeth fairly rattle.

Staggering forward under the weight of the unexpected blow until his hands came in contact with the floor, the mountain tramp dropped his precious carpet-bag, and with an agile spring regained his equilibrium, turning in the act so that he faced his red-shirted captor.

"Monkey with Jonathan Trotter, will yeou, yeou gosh-darned skunk!" he thundered, with a marked nasal twang, in a voice so deep and powerful that it almost caused the roof to tremble, his keen gray eyes snapping wickedly, his lank form growing stiff and towering with righteous indignation. "By th' holy mackerel! I'll tickle yeour diaphragm with my umberella, darn yeou!"

And he did. With the skill of an expert fencer he caught the astounded Sweet By-and-By in

the midriff with the pointed steel tip of his novel weapon, so suddenly and so forcefully that the miner dropped in a heap, gasping for breath.

As the red-shirt went down, clawing frantically at the pit of his stomach, a derisive shout went up from the crowd.

One keen, scrutinizing look at the faces of the two alleged culprits, and Gold Gabe, his face plainly showing his disappointment, turned to Jeems Rivers and said:

"Thar is a mistake here, Jeems—neither of these fellows is guilty. Th' man out thar wore a full beard and a dark slouch hat, as was revealed by th' flash of his pistol."

"A remarkably keen eye is yours, alcalde!" sneered Julian St. Elmo. "There was but one report heard, and I can take my Bible oath *you* fired. I will leave it to the other gentlemen present."

"Thar was two shots," calmly declared Jeems Rivers. "They rung out exactly together. I saw ther flash out thar, but not ther man wot held ther weepen. When I went out, I found this hunk of fat skulkin' in ther darkness, an' I run him in. Ef ther alcalde sez he hain't ther man, he hain't; same way with Yank thar, though he *do* look pi'zen."

"See heur, yeou feller—jest yeou let Jonathan Trotter an' his locks alone," exclaimed the lank tramp sharply, turning from the writhing Sweet By-and-By to Rivers, and savagely brandishing his umbrella in that worthy's face. "I belong to one of th' fu'st families of th' State of Maine, I hev tramped all th' way to this heathenish place in search of gold, an', by smoke! ef yeou try to *plunder* me, darn yeou, I'll puncture yeour anatomy with th' pint of my umberella—I *will*, by th' holy mackerel!"

"Say, yeou, captin'g," turning inquisitively to Gold Gabe—"did yeou offer five thousand dollars fer th' man that blazed away from eout thar in th' dark jest neow?"

The alcalde started, then quickly replied: "I did, my man; why do you ask?"

"Not jest eout of curiosity; yeou see, captin'g, I hev bin sum'at of a hunter, a mighty Nimrod, in my day—hev cleaned eout my weight in wilcats an' painters an' *sech* menny a time up in th' dark shadows of big Mount Katahdin. Jest now I feel kinder savage—like a meat-ax, yeou know, an' to relieve my pent-up feelings I'm goin' to search for th' hyena that was prowlin' round eout thar. I thort I seed a flash in th' darkness es Hunki Hans thar an' me kem up."

Impatiently, the giant of the golden locks listened until the mountain tramp had finished, then turned to examine the corpse of the dark Hercules, confident that, even if the lurking assassin was never found, he could clear himself of the dark charge brought against him by Julian St. Elmo.

The pathway of the fatal bullet must prove conclusively that it had been fired from a point directly opposite to that at which the alcalde had stood.

But no sooner had Gold Gabe turned and pushed his way through the gaping crowd than a sharp cry escaped him.

Shasta Sam's body was gone!

Crowding forward, with exclamations of surprise, the excited inmates of the Fair Play clustered around the spot where the ill-fated giant had fallen. A small pool of blood marked the place—that was all.

"Alcalde, allow me to congratulate you," softly uttered Julian St. Elmo, smiling maliciously, as his coldly glittering blue eyes met those of the nonplused giant. "It seems that the machinery of the law—*your* law—has been put in operation. A most damaging piece of evidence has been suppressed—the body of your victim stolen away. I shouldn't wonder if you escaped, after all."

"You devil!" hissed Gold Gabe, through his hard-set teeth, a vivid tongue of flame seeming to start from his glowing eyes. "You have done this. I would rid the territory of its worst pest if I sent a bullet through your treacherous heart."

"It may appear that way to you, my dear alcalde—there is no accounting for the opinions some men hold; but allow me to suggest that it would be a very unhealthy thing for you to attempt to do. If you will take the trouble to look, you will observe that I have you *'lined*.'"

"As I hev *you*, yer two-legged hunk of deceit pure an' undefiled!" chimed in Jeems Rivers, grimly. "Don't yer kem fer ter try eny of yer skin games on ther alcalde w'en I'm 'round, or saltpeter won't keep yer carr'on frame from sp'ilin'."

The assembled Nowharites dropped back out of range.

But the impending triangular conflict was not to occur.

Jonathan Trotter and his fellow tramp, scarcely missed by any of the excited throng so brief had been their absence, suddenly appeared at the door, bearing between them a writhing, twisting, bleeding form.

"Hooray!" yelled Jeems Rivers, in delight, as the mountain tramps gently deposited their burden on the rough floor. "Boyees, King Gabe war kerect! Thar's ther galoot he seen—whiskers, slouch hat, an' winged in ther leg, too."

A sound akin to a malediction escaped Julian St. Elmo.

"A truce, alcalde," he muttered, lowering his weapon.

"A truce be it," assented Gold Gabe.

"Captin, I calc'late we hev fetched your man," complacently announced the Yankee, his voice husky, apparently from his recent exertions. "Jest hold on to that leetle five thousand bag o' dust till Hunki Hans an' me call fer it. Guess these card sharps 'u'd skin us putty quick—I've hearn tell as how they was gosh-darned slip'ry cusses."

A quick, impatient nod, and the alcalde bent over the wounded man.

A sojourn of half a year in the gold-camp had rendered the giant familiar with the faces of the remaining members of the original few who had pitched their tents on Nowhar's site. This man was one of the number.

"Jabez Fourche, what have you to say for yourself?" demanded the alcalde, his face growing cold and stern as he gazed steadfastly into the eyes of the luckless wretch who had attempted to take his life. "Let your tongue move glibly and truthfully, or I'll take care that Nowhar plants you to-morrow, as well as the victim of your cowardly shot. Speak! Who put up this job against me?"

The blande giant's hand was upon his revolver; a deadly light shone in his big blue eyes.

A few paces distant, his arms carelessly folded, stood Julian St. Elmo, smiling cynically.

At Gold Gabe's terse inquiry, Jabez Fourche's glance shifted uneasily to the gambler's face, and thence to the two mountain tramps.

"Thet berdered windin'-blades an' his ball ov soap-fat hev laid me out," he muttered, glaring savagely at Trotter and Hunki Hans. "Ef they hadn't 'a' pounced on ter me ther minute I tumbled over 'ith thet bullet in my laig, I c'u'd 'a' crawled off inter ther bresh, hurt es I war; but they touched me up 'ith a gag an' ropes, an' snaked me off in ther dark. Drat 'em! sech trash hev no biz'ness in ther hills!"

"Alcalde," he went on, his eyes turning back to meet the steadfast, piercing gaze of the giant, "I don't see why I sh'u'd stay by them as won't lift a finger ter help me w'en I'm down thro' tryin' ter do ther dirty work. They say ye're white, an' p'rhaps I'd better chaine it 'ith you."

"Ther bullet w'ot dropped ther big galoot war intended fer you. Ther hull thing war a set-up job, an' ther man at ther bottom ov it war—"

A revolver cracked spitefully, and a strange tremor ran through Fourche's frame; his jaw dropped, his eyes assumed a glassy, staring aspect, and over his grimy features crept a strange rigidity.

The hiatus in his words would never be filled. He was dead.

Uttering a sharp, fierce cry, the baffled King of Nowhar whipped out his revolvers, and sprang to his feet.

CHAPTER III.

AT A ROPE'S END.

A SARDONIC laugh rippled lightly from the full red lips of Julian St. Elmo.

"Alcalde, you are playing in hard luck!" he exclaimed, in mock sympathy.

The blonde giant vouchsafed no immediate response. His face was white and drawn, and in the intensity of his passion his big steel-blue eyes gleamed like redly smoldering coals as he cast about him a steady, sweeping glance in search of the author of that dastardly shot. He was in a dangerous mood, and a man with a thought less of daring, of reckless bravado, than Julian St. Elmo would have held his peace.

Behind the gambler, a trifle to his left, a polished "six" at full cock in each hand, stood grizzled Jeems Rivers. Not a motion of the handsome sport, however slight, escaped his wary eye.

Between the alcalde and the door was a group of a dozen men—strong, rugged fellows all, and

stout adherents of the blonde giant. Facing them, at an equal distance beyond the alcalde, were a score of Nowhar's gamblers, roughs and toughs.

That a desperate battle for the supremacy was imminent between these two factions of the gold-camp none present could doubt, and those identified with neither party discreetly retired, ranging themselves along the bar and the wall opposite.

"I reckon it's no use ter look, King Gabe—ther shot kem from among thet pack ov bums back thar, an' yer can depend they'll keep dark who did it," observed Rivers, slowly.

"It was more ov St. Elmo's devilish work," muttered the giant, in a voice scarcely audible. "Time will tell; and when our leetle reckoning does he will find it against him."

"Jest say ther word, alcalde, an' I'll pump the cock-eyed coyote full ov lead!" said Rivers, glaring fiercely at the nonchalant gambler, his fingers playing lightly on the triggers of his weapons.

"And glide gently over the range for your pains!" retorted Julian St. Elmo, smiling maliciously. "Slow and easy, my genial Jeems; don't identify yourself too closely with this overgrown, murderous boaster; Gold Gabe, alias Buzzard Bill—it mightn't be exactly healthy, you know."

"Have a care, St. Elmo!" gritted the alcalde, turning menacingly upon the gambler, the blood suddenly surging back into his face.

"Gentlemen!" cried the handsome sport, stepping back a pace, and deigning the blonde giant not so much as a glance. "Gentlemen, you know that I am a knight of the green cloth—a gambler; and, that, like all others of my class, I am looked down upon by the majority of the people with whom I come in contact. But I think you will agree with me that I have played a square game in Nowhar, whether the tools were pistols or cards. Gambler though I am, I count myself on the side of law and order, every time."

"To-night, within half an hour, you have seen two men shot to death; the first, the giant stranger, by Jabez Fourche, at the instigation of some party or parties unknown; the second, Fourche himself, while confessing to the so-called King of Nowhar who were his accomplices in the murder of Shasta Sam."

"Because of some private grudge he holds against me, this Gold Gabe, alias Buzzard Bill, charged with the murder of Monterey Merle in one of the mining-camps of Stanislaus, has seen fit to accuse me of being an accessory in both of the tragedies of to-night."

"Gentlemen, with almost his last breath Jabez Fourche declared that the bullet killing Shasta Sam was intended for this other mountain of flesh, Gold Gabe—a statement that I believe utterly unworthy of credence."

"But I do believe that both Jabez Fourche and myself were the victims of as diabolical a plot as ever human brain evolved."

"To settle all doubt in my own mind, and to convince you that I am not guilty of the crime laid to me, I am going to point out the murderer of Jabez Fourche, and then wring from him a full and free confession of the details of this hellish plot, or scatter his brains to the four winds."

"There he stands—you know him as Truthful Joe!"

And Julian St. Elmo flung out his right hand, elevating a revolver at full cock at the head of a squat, heavily-built ruffian in the midst of the crowd of roughs.

"Yes, it was Truthful Joe, as great a rascal as ever cursed a gold-camp, and there he is," sternly reiterated the gambler. "I saw the revolver flash in his hand."

A buzz of excitement went up from each of the two factions.

The giant of the golden locks stood astounded; then a grim smile played fitfully around the corners of his mouth.

"Step out here, veracious Joseph, and be lively about it, or I'll accelerate your laggard movements with a bullet or two," continued St. Elmo, his blue eyes gleaming coldly. "For once since we have met I am anxious to hear the music of your voice."

An expression akin to terror crept into the beady black eyes of the squat, misshapen ruffian; his swarthy face grew livid, and he trembled like one palsy-stricken as he shambled forward.

"Alcalde, for once assert the authority you don't possess and disarm the wretch," said the gambler, with an ill-concealed sneer. "If I am not mistaken, you will find one chamber of his revolver empty."

Flashing a look of deadly malignity at the handsome sport, King Gabe mechanically complied with the pointed request.

Truthful Joe offered no resistance; he trembled yet more violently, and seemed on the verge of sinking to the floor when the alcalde announced that the gambler's assertion was correct.

Julian St. Elmo smiled coldly.

"That will do, King Gabe—you may pass," he uttered. "The game is now between this murderous wretch and myself, and he has got to show his hand. No matter who his allies may be, he is going to 'peach' the whole thing or die without a minute's warning."

"An' ef I peach—w'ot then?" demanded Truthful Joe, in quavering accents.

"Tell you better afterward," tersely replied St. Elmo, his gleaming eyes fixed in a steady, unwavering gaze on the face of the squat ruffian.

"See thet I'm not sarved like Fourche war—thet I git a fair chance fer my white alley w'en I'm done, an' I'll talk," said Truthful Joe, in a slow, hesitating way.

"Go on—you shall have a square deal," declared the gambler.

"Wal, yer all knows thet I hev bin prospectin' on grub-stake fer sum days 'mong ther hills on ther Elk City trail," began the ruffian, in profound silence. "'Bout noon yistiddy, thet tall pilgrim, Shasta Sam, rounded up et my lay-out, an' we drifted onter a talk 'bout this hyar camp, an' he axed a heap ov questions 'bout Gold Gabe hyar."

"I hain't so smart ez I mou't be, mebbe, but I c'u'dn't help seein' through a knot-hole big ez my hat. I knowed in a minute thet ther berdered big cuss war no fr'end ov ther alcalde, an' as soon es he putt out fer Nowhar, I lit ther same way, takin' a short cut 'cross ther hills so's ter beat 'im in a good six hour."

"Et war King Gabe as hed grub-staked me, an' I war putty sart'in thet he 'u'd kim down with ther dust ef I putt him onter ther big pilgrim's lay."

"Et war jest noon w'en I struck Nowhar, an' I hoofed it straight ter ther Yaller Boy, ther alcalde's mine. Thar I found 'im, all alone in ther leetle office at ther jaws ov ther drift, an' let 'im in on w'ot I hed diskivered."

"I seen in a minute thet I hed struck pay-dirt, fer w'ot I hed sed putt ther alcalde inter hot water. He walked up an' down ther office a few times, then stopped short an' asked me ef I wanted ter make a clean thousand dollars."

"An' I war jist fool enuff ter tell him I did. W'en a feller like me gits down on his luck, he hain't very pertic'ler how a raise are made, jist so he makes et, yer know. Ther alcalde went on ter say he wanted a feller 'bout my size ter tend ter sech leetle matters es ther one in hand, an' thet he w'u'd make et wu'th while fer me ter do things up in shipshape."

"Arter more palaver, he kem down ter biz'ness. W'at he wanted done war this: Thar war two fellers in camp, besides ther big pilgrim on ther road, w'at he held a grudge ag'in—'you, St. Elmo an' Jabez Fourche. I war ter lay fer Shasta Sam an' steer 'im ter ther Fair Play ter find Gold Gabe; Fourche war ter lay outside, an' at ther proper time put a bullet in 'ther dark giant—he thinkin' et war you puttin' up ther job, fer I war ter tell 'im thet, so thet ef anything went wrong an' he war caught, ther alcalde w'u'dn't git his foot in et. He war ter say, too, ef caught, thet he war layin' fer Gold Gabe, an' war paid by you fer doin' et, an' thet ther shootin' ov Shasta Sam war an accident."

"He allowed et war a putty good plan, an' thet yer an' ther rest ov ther boyees w'u'd pull 'im through. He didn't know thet et war a put-up job betwixt ther alcalde an' me ter wing 'im es soon es he hed settled Shasta Sam. Fact war, he never even s'pishuned King Gabe hed anything ter do with ther matter—their pore cuss thought you war a doin' et."

"Ther alcalde kalkilated thet Fourche's yarn w'u'd jest about settle yer in this hyar camp, an' at ther best yer 'u'd hev ter amble on ter some other man's town. An' et did seem fer awhile thet ther plot war a-goin' ter work most bootifully, fer lordy! how ther alcalde did pile on ther agony!"

"But w'en et kem ter ther scratch, I seen from Fourche's eyes thet I war a goner ef he went ahead, so I let 'im hev et. You seen ther trick worked, an' brought me ter law."

"Thar yer hev ther hull thing b'iled down. Ther alcalde war ther galoot w'at set up ther job, an' I reckon he are ther one yer want ter tackle, not me."

Slowly and with hesitancy at first, but in-

creasing fluency and confidence, had the rascally Truthful Joe unfolded his tale.

At its conclusion, a hoarse yell went up from the St. Elmo faction; Gold Gabe's friends prepared for action, and the ominous clicking of pistol-locks became general.

The giant of the golden locks stood like a bronze statue, his polished self-cocking revolvers drawn and ready, his big blue eyes fairly blazing.

"As foul a tissue of lies as was ever hatched, Julian St. Elmo," he enunciated, in cold, even tones. "Truthful Joe I brand as a liar, a fraud, and a cheat; *you*, his abettor, a wretch too low, mean and soulless to longer pollute God's footstool!"

An expression of horror crept swiftly over the white face of the handsome sport—death stared him in the face!

The alcalde's long arm had swung to a level with lightning-like quickness, and there was an unmistakable gleam in the lurid depths of the eye looking along the polished length of his weapon—a gleam that meant death!

A flash, a keen report, a curling wreath of thin white smoke, and Julian St. Elmo dropped limp and lifeless, the sharp cry he was about to utter dying away with a hollow gurgle deep in his throat.

Before a man in either faction could lift a hand the deadly weapon again exploded, and Truthful Joe, with a hoarse yell, staggered back and fell to the floor, shot through and through.

At the second shot, as one man, the blonde giant's friends, headed by faithful, grizzled Jeems Rivers, spread quickly in the form of a crescent, the cocked revolvers in the hands of each bearing full on the surging crowd of roughs.

"Stiddy thar, *you critter!*" thundered Rivers, his voice rising high above the uproar. "Crook a finger at King Gabe an' we'll *mow* ye!"

The tumult subsided, and the turbulent crowd relapsed into quietude. Far braver men than the roughs thirsting for the life of the blonde giant would have quailed before that crescent of deadly muzzles.

"We've played the wrong cards this deal, boys," muttered Hump Dunkle, a hunchback gambler-desperado, his long white fingers toying with the hammers of his weapons. "We're in the hole, deep; not only will we have to let the alcalde slip us, but we shall have to look sharp that his Law and Order Committee don't kick us out of Nowhar to boot."

Not without a purpose were the words uttered. They were intended for the ears of Gold Gabe and his followers, and to cover the low, guarded tones of Faro Frank, St. Elmo's right hand man.

"Throw down your weapons—own yourselves beaten, and we will declare a truce until Truthful Joe's story has been proved a lie," cried the alcalde, facing the crowd, his eyes aflame, his weapons ready.

"It would be madness to fight, even if we were so disposed," responded Faro Frank, moving forward. "The only thing we can do is—"

Quick as thought he fired. A sharp volley rung through the room with a deafening crash, and every light in the Fair Play flickered and went out, shrouding the place in an instant's time in the deepest gloom.

Gold Gabe dropped to the floor, escaping the murderous storm of bullets that followed.

"Treachery, boyees! Let ther p'ison varments hev it!" shouted Jeems Rivers, rapidly working his weapons.

In answer a series of brilliant flashes ran along the human crescent, the cracking of the revolvers sounding in a heavy, continuous crash.

Following out the hastily formed plans of Faro Frank, the St. Elmo faction, under cover of the intense darkness, had dropped lightly to the floor. Unharmed by the volley, the desperadoes crept rapidly toward the spot at which the alcalde had last been seen.

"The big cuss is as full of holes as the average pocket in this hyar camp, in all probability," muttered Hump Dunkle, as with Faro Frank he led the advance, his voice rendered almost inaudible by the continuous cracking of the revolvers in the hands of the blonde giant's friends. "I had a bead on him, and as soon as the lights went out I let slip two bullets. Then, too, the rest of the boys tried their hands, and it is not at all likely he escaped."

"I don't think he dodged us, though I heard no fall," as cautiously observed Faro Frank, in return. "Unless he bears a charmed life some of the bullets sent point-blank at his head must have reached a vital spot."

"Aha!"

A bright flash, a stunning report, and Hump Dunkle caught a fleeting glimpse of the white, stern-set face of Gold Gabe, crouching, revolvers in hand, as Faro Frank, with that sharp exclamation, rolled over with a ball through his shoulder.

"Shoot low, boys! they're creeping in on you under your fire!" shouted the alcalde, backing away, his weapons exploding with each pace he retreated.

A hoarse yell from the baffled roughs; a wild rush toward the blonde giant, in which friends and foes became inextricably entangled; a moment of blindly desperate struggling—then a series of sharp, exulting cries, and the "hard crowd" of Nowhar surged toward the door, with the alcalde a captive.

Close at the heels of the victorious party pushed grizzled Jeems Rivers and his men, out in the sultry August night. Once in the open air they halted to form some plan for the rescue of the blonde giant.

The entire camp had been aroused by the fierce affray; half-nude but thoroughly armed miners came hurrying to the Fair Play from every direction.

Straight to a lightning-blasted tree a hundred yards from St. Elmo's place hurried the roughs, headed by the hunchback desperado, Hump Dunkle. Despite their haste the alcalde's captors worked methodically and in grim silence. A dozen torches were soon aflame, casting a weird light over the strange scene. The noosed end of a rope was quickly drawn tight around Gold Gabe's neck, and the other end hurled over a straight limb to be grasped by a dozen eager hands.

"Up with him!" yelled the hunchback, clapping his hands together in fiendish glee. "Quick! up with him before the galoots from the Yellow Boy get here. Judge Lynch is too good for the dirty cuss!"

Speechless, gasping for breath from the terrible, cutting pressure of the rope on his throttle, his hands bound tightly at his back, Gold Gabe glared defiantly at his implacable foes, his glowing eyes in a measure revealing the deadly hatred he could not otherwise express.

Amid low, inhuman jeers and yells, the roughs tightened their clutch on the rope, and drew their helpless victim up until only his toes touched the dry, parched earth; then, with devilish brutality, they loosed their hold, allowing the half-choked alcalde to fall headlong.

"Up, boys, up!" shrieked the deformed fiend, his eyes glowing like living coals. "To-night this tree must bear such fruit as it never bore before!"

In response, as their helpless victim staggered blindly to his feet, the grimy hands again tightened on the rope; one move of the brawny arms, one pace backward, and Gold Gabe would no longer be King of Nowhar.

In that single instant intervening between the blonde giant and a terrible death, a strange sound rung high above the clamoring voices of the lynchers—a sound never before heard in the isolated gold-camp.

A woman's scream, loud, clear and piercing!

With one accord, the roughs started forward, the rope slipping unheeded through their hands, while they stared at a fresh scene of commotion astounded.

Through the lawless throng, pushing, kicking, striking, his long arms and legs working like flails, a short, heavy revolver of the "bulldog" pattern clutched in each hand, came Jonathan Trotter, closely followed by a fair young girl!

Perfect in contour of form and feature, attired in the deepest black, her lustrous dark eyes dilating with horror, her face gleaming white and deathlike, she appeared more like a visitant from another world than aught human under the garish light of the flambeaux.

A snarl, not unlike that of some maddened beast of prey, escaped the thin, bloodless, froth-flecked lips of the hunchback desperado.

"Up!" he screamed, drawing a glittering revolver. "Up with him, you devils! Are we to be cheated of our revenge by the sight of a woman's face? Up, I say! or upon my oath I'll send your coward souls to meet the master you all owe allegiance, the Old Boy of Brimstone!"

His voice rising high and shrill, his misshapen figure quivering with passion, his feet beating an irregular tattoo on the hard, dry earth, his face cold and livid, his hollow, restless eyes sparkling venomously; the wretch, bearing throughout a strong resemblance to a pictured fiend of the infernal regions, with a hand that never trembled, a nerve that never faltered, covered the hesitating lynchers with his deadly weapon.

That he would carry his threat into effect the roughs never doubted; one slow, steady pull, and Gold Gabe swung clear of the ground.

At that instant, just as a second anguished scream broke from the tottering woman, the Yankee's revolver went up, and its heavy report rung out.

Whirling half-around, the giant of the golden locks hung quivering a moment; then, with a sharp, snapping sound, the strands of the rope parted, and he fell heavily to the ground, to all appearances lifeless.

One swift bound, and Jonathan Trotter confronted the enraged hunchback desperado, with a deft blow knocking the revolver from his hand.

"*Yeou, p'izen sarpent!*" he hissed, shoving the smoking muzzle of his "bulldog" under the gambler's nose. "Crook a finger, yeou or yeours—open yeour pertater-trap an' by smoke! yeou'll choke to death on cold lead! *Yeou!*"

The Yankee's words were distinctly audible, and the roughs turned sullenly from their leader to stare curiously at Trotter's *protegee*.

Halting beside the giant form of Gold Gabe, and pressing her hands to her throbbing temples, the girl gazed at his empurpled face a moment, then in a sudden, tempestuous outburst of grief, flung herself on his broad chest, sobbing:

"Oh, Ronald! Ronald, my brother! They have killed you!"

CHAPTER IV. THE PLOTTERS.

THREE hours later.

In a small but rather comfortably furnished apartment in the rear of the Fair Play, at a rough deal table abundantly supplied with bottles and glasses, were four men—Julian St. Elmo, Faro Frank, the hunchback and the dark Hercules.

That both Shasta Sam and St. Elmo had narrowly escaped death was attested by the bloody, tightly drawn bandages about their heads. The right arm of Faro Frank hung in a sling. Of the four, Hump Dunkle alone had passed through the fierce *mêlée* unscathed.

The faces of all were dark and lowering, for each had tasted of the bitterness of defeat.

"So, after all, King Gabe is alive and little the worse for wear," uttered St. Elmo, wrathfully. "I tell you, gents, this blue-eyed giant is a hard customer for us to buck against. Half a year ago he struck the camp, a perfect stranger; to-day, two-thirds of the one hundred and fifty men of Nowhar swear by him. He owns the only paying mine yet discovered here, and seems as rich as Croesus besides. Before he was here a month he was recognized as 'chief' to such an extent that he was called upon to settle all disputes, and was generally known as the 'alcalde'—a title, by the way, that was bestowed upon him by his mine superintendent, Jeems Rivers, who is full of the queer ways of old Santa Fe. May the Old Boy fly away with them both, say I; for neither is a slouch at slinging lead, and both display a natural aptitude for slipping out of unpleasantly tight places with unruffled feathers."

"There was no way to prevent his escape; when it came to the scratch it was, throw up our hands or go under," declared the hunchback desperado. "The game was well played from the moment our new pard here, Shasta Sam, was gotten out of the way so neatly, until you and Truthful Joe went down under the alcalde's fire. After that Frank, here, and myself attempted to carry out the instructions you had given us at the opening of the ball. We passed the word to the boys to shoot out the lights and let Gold Gabe have a volley. That part of the scheme seemed to wash all right. The boys dropped to the floor in time to avoid the return fire, and we crept forward to see if we had settled the alcalde. He must have adopted our tactics and dropped, for we found him ready for us, as Frank's arm shows. In the struggle that followed, the boys kept together by using our code of signals. We succeeded in overpowering the alcalde, and dragged him outside for Judge Lynch, knowing that the superintendent and his men, weakened by the fight, would hardly dare attempt a rescue until reinforced by others from the Yellow Boys."

"Right there the strange part of the affair comes in. The alcalde was dangling at the end of a rope when that meddling Yank, with a young and beautiful woman, appeared and with the skill of a dead-shot cut the rope with a bullet."

"This woman," eagerly interpolated St. Elmo;

"what was she to the alcalde—wife, sister, or sweetheart?"

"A sister, she claimed; at all events, a rarely beautiful creature," replied the hunchback, refilling his glass.

"Aha! Go on," said St. Elmo, impatiently, a strange glow in his blue eyes.

"Well, the Yankee struck the weapon from my hand, and shoved the muzzle of his bulldog revolver under my nose in a way that was altogether savage. I knew then that I was out of the game. I tell you, gents, that walking graveyard relic isn't so innocent as he looks. He's rank poison, depend upon it."

"And the woman, what of her?" queried St. Elmo, as the speaker paused to swallow his liquor.

"Oh, she flung herself upon the half-dead giant, calling him 'Ronald, my brother.' Had the boys acted with a grain of sense, things would have ended differently. Two or three well-directed bullets would have rid Nowhar of both the alcalde and the Yank. But our crowd stood open-mouthed until Jeems Rivers and a fresh body of the Yellow-Boy men appeared, then scattered in the dark, leaving the game in the hands of our foes. In the confusion I got off with the others."

"And lucky at that," commented Faro Frank.

"Yes, he was fortunate to escape; for Rivers hates him above all the galoots of Nowhar, and you may be sure would lose no chance to do him up," said St. Elmo, staring moodily at Dunkle. "But it really is a shame that the alcalde slipped through our fingers, after our having thrown away the lives of Jabez Fourche and Truthful Joe, in weaving a web to entangle him. The affair has been sadly mismanaged in some of its details."

"It was no fault of mine that King Gabe escaped the noose," grimly protested the hunchback, a steely ring in his voice. "And for the present, St. Elmo, count me out of the fight. When I have wiped out that cursed Yankee, you will again find me pitted against the alcalde—not before."

"Soho!" exclaimed Shasta Sam, his black eyes sparkling. "Then, since I have cast my lot with th' so-called 'hard crowd' ov Nowhar, allow me to take your place in this deadly game. My fingers itch for a chance at th' throat ov Buzzard Bill; thar is an old score between us ov years' standin'. Monterey Merle must be avenged."

"Bravo!" cried St. Elmo. "What say you, lads—shall it be giant against giant?"

"Why not? I, for one, am sure that King Gabe will find in our big friend here a foe man worthy of his steel," observed Faro Frank.

The hunchback's thin, bloodless lips curled contemptuously.

"And I am equally sure 'our big friend here' will catch a Tartar," he rejoined, with a sneer. "But I have no objection to offer—the arrangement promises a funeral or two. My hobby, you know, St. Elmo."

"Trust me to handle th' Tartar—you look out for th' Yank, dear boy, else you may lead th' van on th' mournful occasion you mention," lightly retorted Shasta Sam.

"Our misshapen little pard is slightly out of humor, nettled by his unexpected defeat," said St. Elmo, half apologetically, to the dark Hercules. "He has spoken, and the days of the meddling Yank are numbered."

"As are th' alcalde's," quickly returned Shasta Sam. "Mark it, gentlemen. Ere ten days have come and gone, this giant ov th' golden locks shall pass from time into eternity."

"And the girl?" queried Faro Frank, nipping the end of a cigar with his sharp, white teeth.

St. Elmo laughed softly.

"I'll attend to her," he replied. "In his dying moments, I want the alcalde to know that the dainty beauty is a captive in my hands."

The eyes of the dark Hercules glowed yet more brightly.

"You propose to—"

"I propose to abduct the girl," interrupted the gambler. "I have formed a plan of action. We will steal away the little beauty, and employ her as a means of luring the giant to destruction."

"A capital idea," observed Faro Frank.

"Capital," assented Shasta Sam. "It will simplify matters greatly. We are all working against the alcalde; we shall all obtain our revenge. I want th' murderer ov Monterey Merle to suffer th' torments ov th' damned. I hate him!"

"Not a tenth as bitterly as I do," declared Julian St. Elmo, bringing his clinched hand down upon the table with a force that made the bottles dance. "Not only do I hate him, but I fear him; for—"

Checking himself, the gambler glanced suspiciously at his *confreres*.

"For—what?" asked Faro Frank.

"For several very good reasons," answered St. Elmo, laughing nervously. "Let that suffice. A man shouldn't grow too confidential, you know, even with the best of his friends."

"Oh! oh! So there's a skeleton in the closet of our dainty sport!" sneered the hunchback. "Probably the lordly King Gabe holds the key to the secret. It's a wise saying that 'dead men tell no tales.' Fill, boys, and let's drink success to St. Elmo!"

CHAPTER V.

A CHALLENGE ACCEPTED.

THE warm, golden light of the morning sun, entering at the open door, lay in a broad belt across the rough puncheon floor of the office of the Yellow Boy Mine, bringing out in strong relief the dark, stern look mantling the rugged face of Jeems Rivers, the superintendent.

Pacing restlessly up and down the length of the strong slab shanty, his gray eyes fixed on the floor, his brawny hands clasped behind him, the old miner strove hard to curb a feeling of impatience. Pausing anon at the open door, he cast a sweeping, expectant look up and down the narrow valley, only to resume his monotonous walk with a half-surly shake of his gray head, and a muttered imprecation.

"It are more than sing'lar thet peekin', pryin', windin'-blades don't come," he exclaimed, savagely jerking his slouch hat well down over his eyes. "I kin understand why King Gabe are not hyar, but this Trotter beats me. W'ot on airth this alcalde meant bringin' sech a jumpin'-jack inter ther game, I can't see, nohow. An' thet Hunki Hans—sech a pair ov bothouse plants I hain't see'd fer nigh on ter a year. Detectives, too. Dern my cats, they're no good, though ther Yank mou't 'a' done wuss last night. The boyees say it war a fine shot he made w'en he cut ther alcalde down. But they're innocent cusses, an' ther cits ov this hyar camp are jest a leetle too tuff fer 'em. I'll look 'em up."

Leaving the office, Rivers strode moodily in the direction of St. Elmo's place, where, he conjectured, he would be likely to hear of the man he seemed burning to meet.

The gold-camp was situated in a narrow valley, down which coursed a small, swiftly-flowing creek. On each side of this stream, the precipitous hills loftily reared their bald crests. Upon a strip of bottom-land, on the eastern bank of the creek, were ranged the rude habitations of the Nowharites, the Fair Play being almost centrally located.

Straightway to the saloon and gambling-den hastened Rivers.

The honest miners of the camp were nearly all at work, and as it was yet far too early in the day for many of the recognized bums to be astir, the Fair Play presented a strangely grim and half-deserted look as the mine superintendent stalked across the threshold.

All traces of the night's spiteful affray had been carefully obliterated, save the numerous fresh bullet-holes in the rough walls.

Along the bar, presided over by Cockney Jim, a short, heavy-set, bull-necked Englishman, were ranged perhaps a dozen men of a type known to the gold-camp as "Cripples."

Dependent upon their wits for a living, an indolent, shiftless set they were, suffering all sorts of purely imaginary aches and pains as an excuse to avoid their common bugbear—work.

A body unto themselves, they had in one Ugly Mike, a burly, hairy, square-jawed desperado, a leader whom they feared and obeyed.

Ever ready for any undertaking, however dark, in which there was but little work and big pay, the Cripples were recognized as the worst element of the camp; and that they found plenty of dark, underhanded work to do was amply attested by the yellow dust they ever had at command.

Jeems Rivers's nose elevated itself in open disgust as his eyes played over the ill-odored group. Between the mine superintendent and the Cripples no very amiable feeling existed.

"Smoke—an' whar thar's smoke thar's gineral fire!" muttered Rivers, sententiously, from sheer force of habit dropping his hands upon the revolver butts protruding from his belt. "Never see'd them buzzards hangin' 'bout St. Elmo's place yit 'thout su'thin' crooked turnin' up 'a'ter. Ther question are, whar are Ugly Mike? In confab 'ith ther dainty sport, ov course. Bet my share in ther Yaller Boy thar are sum game afoot ag'in' ther alcalde."

Upon the entrance of the mine superintendent a warning look from Cockney Jim had caused a

complete change to take place in the bearing of the Cripples. A sudden hush came over the group, which each assumed a sickly, woe-begone expression lugubrious in the extreme.

"H-how are yer ru-roomatiz this mornin', P-Pious P-Pete?" wheezed a fat, oily-looking rascal near the end of the bar, casting a stealthy glance at Rivers.

"Wuss—much wuss; I kin sca'cely move," was the doleful reply. "An' how are phthisic, Wheezy Ben?"

"J-jes' ther s-same; I b-breathe—th-that are all," chokingly replied the fleshy beat, wheezing and gasping, as he raised his glass of beaded liquor. "H-heur are a t-toast: May our h-health be b-better s-soon!"

And the fat fraud's twinkling little eyes blinked knowingly at the roof as he allowed the fiery whisky to trickle slowly down his throat.

Smiling grimly, Rivers strode past the Cripples and on to the card-tables beyond the bar.

Early as was the hour, half a score of men were there, clustered closely around a faro layout, nearly all engaged in play.

A close observer might have noticed a scarcely perceptible widening of the gray eyes of the mine superintendent as he scanned the group.

Shasta Sam, the dark Hercules, occupied the dealer's chair, a cool, half-insolent smile parting his full red lips just enough to reveal the rows of gleaming white teeth.

At the giant's right hand sat Faro Frank, with his injured arm in a sling, an exultant look upon his usually immobile face.

Seated opposite to the giant dealer, cold, beady drops of perspiration oozing from his narrow forehead, a strangely greedy glare in his round eyes, his long, claw-like fingers working nervously, was the object of the superintendent's search, Jonathan Trotter, the Yankee.

Beside him was Hunki Hans, equally agitated.

At the end of the rough table, his nimble white fingers playing methodically upon the buttons of the cue-box, was Hump Dunkle.

A sardonic grin distorted the face of the hunchback desperado, and a sneering laugh rippled softly from his lips as stake after stake placed by the mountain tramps dropped into the bank's coffers.

Two hours earlier, the two odd pards had appeared at the Fair Play, jointly carrying the dilapidated carpet-bag of the Yankee. So absurd was the action, so jealous the care each exercised over the precious "relic," that the hangers-on at the gambling-den readily jumped to the conclusion that the bag contained the reward of five thousand dollars offered by the alcalde the night before for the capture of the mysterious assassin.

The mountain tramps had earned the reward by apprehending Jabez Fourche. Then, too, both had been seen shortly after daybreak prowling around the alcalde's quarters—a fact that quickly led to a general belief in the correctness of the first surmise.

Firm in the belief that a lead had been struck that could be made to "pan out" well, the capers at once conveyed the intelligence to St. Elmo, who, with the dark Hercules, Faro Frank and the hunchback, was yet in the small apartment at the rear of the Fair Play.

"It's an opportunity that we mustn't allow to pass, boys," said the gambler. "Five thousand dollars is a sum that is not to be picked up every day in Nowhar, even with a brace box. The money is as good as the bank's, for it's ten chances to one that they tackle the game."

Accordingly, the four men at once repaired to the faro tables, where with consummate cunning St. Elmo quickly ascertained that his capers' suspicions were well-founded. After that, it proved an easy matter to induce Trotter and his rotund pard to hazard their suddenly acquired wealth.

During the opening deal, the gambler himself manipulated the silver box; but the appearance of Ugly Mike and his Cripples, some fifteen minutes before the arrival of the mine superintendent, led to St. Elmo giving way to the dark Hercules, while he, with the chief of the ruffians, returned to the small room back of the tables.

What followed proved that Shasta Sam was an expert with the cards. At the end of the third deal, the mountain tramps were losers to the extent of two thousand dollars. They were following exactly the same line of play, Trotter in each instance singling out the card and placing his stake, to be followed closely by the Teuton.

"Dat vas a pad peezness," ruefully muttered the latter, watching the long, supple fingers of the dark Hercules as he deftly shuffled the cards. "Mine fr'ent, ve haf lose chust der same as a

hair of turn foolts. Chust gaze on dat garpet-sack!"

The miners at the table laughed.

"Yeou keep quiet," irritably retorted Trotter, turning to Hans. "Guess I'm bo's o' thet thar leetle stack o' wealth; an', by smoke! I'll be chawed into gory ribbons afore I'll turn my back to these hear slick sharps. Yeou heer me, Hunki Hans—by th' holy mackerel! I'm goin' to buckle th' slab-sided skunk ag'in, ef I hev to hoof it all th' way back to th' States!"

"An' thet are jes' wot yer'il do, ef yer don't git out ov this, yer spider-legged galoot," uttered Jeems Rivers, in a tone of warning, staring straight into the dusky orbs of Shasta Sam, as he dropped his broad palm upon the unfortunate Yankee's shoulder. "Thar hain't a mite ov a chance fer sech es yer in this hyar skin game; these sharks'll rob yer ov every dollar afore yer know it."

"Hands out of St. Elmo's pockets, Jeems Rivers!" sharply enunciated the hunchback desperado, his eyes sparkling wickedly. "It is a fair game, man against man, and you've no right to interfere. If the festive tenderfoot wishes to buckle the beast, it's his affair—not y'urs. Keep out, I say."

"An' so sez I," snarled Trotter, turning angrily upon the old miner. "Keep eout, red-shirt, an' yeou won't scorch yeour fingers. Darn a meddler, enyway."

"I'm no meddler," protested the mine superintendent, calmly. "Seein' es 'twas ther ole story ov a fool an' his money, I c'u'dn't well help chip-pin' in. No harm done, straunger; ef yer r'al'y want ter blow in yer hard cash, keep right on—I've nothin' ter—"

"Now's yer chance ter make or lose a fortune, gents," interpolated Shasta Sam, in silken tones, darting a defiant glance at the old miner, as he slipped the pack of cards into the box. "If ye have th' sand in yer craws, shake up yer weasel-skins—roll out yer dust. Th' game's made an' away she goes!"

Urged on apparently by the hope that by a turn of fortune they might retrieve their losses, the two odd pards again plunged deeply into the game, betting heavily and with a scientific accuracy that created no little surprise among the spectators. Yet Shasta Sam remained master of the situation, raking down bet after bet until at the end of the deal the two men arose from the table penniless.

"Dutchy, we're gone coons—we hev gone an' done it, staggered right onto th' biggest an' meanest kind o' brace-game, an' dropped our dust, by smoke!" exclaimed Trotter seizing the empty carpet-bag, and wrathfully jamming the heel of his number ten stogy boot through its bottom. "By th' holy mackerel! take thet, yeou hump-shouldered skunk!"

Swift as thought was the movement accompanying the words, and the sadly demolished carpet-bag hurtled through the air, striking Hump Dunkle full in the face and knocking him from the three-legged stool upon which he was seated to the floor, where he landed in a sprawling heap.

So dextrously was the maneuver executed that when the hunchback desperado, snarling and frothing at the mouth like an enraged beast, regained his feet he found the muzzle of a glittering "bulldog" at full cock in the Yankee's outstretched hand staring him in the face.

In the single instant consumed in springing erect, Dunkle had drawn his weapons.

"Easy neow, yeou cantankerous critter," warned Trotter, a devilish grin distorting his thin, homely visage, a fiery sparkle in his twinkling gray eyes, his angular form bent slightly forward, and the index finger of his left hand rising and falling with each word. "Don't yeou try to use them thar irons, or saltpeter won't keep yeour carcass from spilin'!"

Then the short but ponderous form of Hunki Hans swung slowly around until that individual stood back to back with his Yankee pard. A single swift outward fling of each hand, and the corpulent Teuton gripped and held at a level a pair of short, heavy "sixes," sending the men clustered about the table precipitately toward the bar.

"Chust geep yersellufs dose seats on, poys," he said, smiling benignantly at Faro Frank and the giant dealer, a sudden dash of color showing in his usually dim blue eyes.

"Don't fret, Dutchy—it's no affair ov ours," crisply responded Shasta Sam, with a bland smile, as he tipped back in his chair until just the ends of his tapering white fingers rested upon the edge of the table. "Fact is, I reckon our friend ov th' crooked back is amply able to take care ov himself."

"That I am, Shanghai!" hissed the hunch-

back through his hard-set teeth, staring straight into the peculiarly twinkling eyes of the Yankee, and clutching vengefully the revolvers he dared not attempt to use. "Rest assured that I can take care of myself and that nothing short of the life of this walking bunch of bones will satisfy me!"

"Humph!" exclaimed Jeems Rivers, who had retreated but a few paces. "Pears ter me ez ef yer satisfaction war goin' ter be darnation doubtful, Hunchy. Jest putt et down thet all windin' blades are pretty nigh ther top ov ther heap 'bout now; but who knows? He w'ot runs away may live ter fight another day."

So thinly veiled was the sneering mockery of the mine superintendent's words that even the dull-heads present comprehended their import. A grotesque outburst of laughter escaped the Cripples at the bar, bringing a sudden blaze of rage into the eyes of the hunchback.

"Don't yer crowd a man w'en he is down, Mister Man," slowly uttered Trotter, keeping a rigid surveillance over his helpless foe. "It's not the clean white thing by a jug-full. This condemned cuss helped to horn-swaggle Hunki Hans an' me eout o' our dust; but for all o' thet, he shall hev a fair an' equal chance fer his white alley. He sorter hankers fer my life, an' I confess I w'u'dn't object to sockin' a hunk o' lead into his diaphragm."

"Neow, ef he is th' game-cock he looks to be, we kin settle our leetle racket. Let him name his time, place an' we'pons!"

A duel!

The course proposed by the Yankee was a marked departure from the established mode of procedure in Nowhar. As a general thing the rough-and-ready denizens of the camp, when belligerently inclined, had settled their differences by an informal bit of knife or pistol practice.

Therefore, it was not at all unnatural that a pronounced buzz of astonishment should arise from the inmates of the Fair Play. With a deal of anxiety they awaited the hunchback's response.

That Hump Dunkle was clear grit none present doubted. No less prompt than the giving of the challenge was its acceptance.

"Time, one hour hence; place, the horseshoe plateau up the mountain side; weapons, Winchester; conditions to be agreed upon when the ground is reached."

The misshapen gambler uttered the words calmly and deliberately.

"Etcetera, etcetera, an' so forth," mimicked Trotter, lowering his weapon. "O. K., me lord; eny way th' cat jumps 'll suit me. But, by hemlock! I'd jest a leetle rather yeou'd 'a' named revolvers ez th' extinguishers—its ticklesome to see yeou wilt w'en my purp looks straight into yeour ugly mug."

"And I prefer the rifle—the tool has a very persuasive way of inducing a fleeing foe to halt," bitterly retorted the hunchback desperado. "But a truce to idle words—it will occupy our full time to prepare for the duel and reach the ground."

CHAPTER VI.

THE YANKEE AND THE ALCALDE.

In the bustle and confusion that followed, the mine superintendent drew the Yankee aside unobserved, out of hearing of the motley crowd.

"See hyar, my friend, this hyar leetle defelkety with ther hunchback promises ter be a purty big thing," the former observed, by way of opening. "I'm an ole campaigner myself, an' ef yer don't object p'haps I kin give yer a few usef'ul leetle p'int's in ther game ye're 'bout ter play."

"I may be jest a trifle airy in th' upper story, but I'm not sech a condemned idjit es to refuse to listen to a word o' advice now an' then," promptly returned Trotter, his deep base voice sinking to a husky whisper. "Th' fu'st thing, however, is a we'pon o' th' kind required. Ef yeou kin furnish thet, yeou will putt me under 'tarnal obligations."

"I dunno, but I guess I kin fit yer out," said Rivers, reflectively. "If I hain't mistaken, ther alcalde has a Winchester. He'd orter be at ther office ov ther Yaller Boy by this time, so ef yer say ther word we'll walk down an' fix up ther matter."

Trotter uttered an assent, and together they left the Fair Play, Hunki Hans remaining with the convivial spirits gathered at the bar.

Once away from the gambling-den the demeanor of both men changed.

Conversing in low tones, they hastened with long, swinging strides toward the small slab shanty dignified by the term office.

Arrived there, they found Gold Gabe impatiently pacing the floor.

But little the worse for his terrible experience of the preceding night appeared the giant of the golden locks. A silk handkerchief knotted loosely about his throat effectually concealed all traces left by the noose of ruthless Judge Lynch.

"Hello, hello! what's up at the Fair Play now?" he exclaimed, as the superintendent, closely followed by Trotter, strode across the threshold. "I must say you fellows look as if a tale you have to unfold."

The "alcalde's" words were of full, free utterance, quite at variance with his mining-camp dialect of the preceding night.

"True enough; we have a story to relate," spoke Trotter, the nasal twang gone, his voice peculiarly altered. If our mutual friend, Mr. Jeems Rivers here, will see to it that no prowling cavesdropper attempts to take advantage of the crevices so numerous in the surrounding walls, I will try to unburden myself. What little I have to say must be said quickly, for in a trifle less than an hour I am to meet a mortal foe in deadly combat."

Lightly spoken, but full of significance were the words, and at a nod from his colossal friend the superintendent beat a hasty retreat.

Trotter helped himself to a seat upon a three-legged stool.

"To begin with, Morton—"

"Sh! no names, please," interrupted Gold Gabe, with a warning gesture.

"Very well: to begin with, last night after I had seen you and the lady to your quarters, I returned to the vicinity of the Fair Play," resumed the thin individual. "My object in going there is not beyond surmise—it was simply to learn all possible of Julien St. Elmo, whom you had so beautifully 'creased' a short while before."

"And you succeeded, too, I'll wager a thousand; but this pending fight—this duel you mentioned—what of it?" exclaimed the alcalde.

"That I will explain in the course of my narrative," said Trotter, calmly. "Upon my arrival at St. Elmo's place, I found my partner in this affair in waiting. He had not been idle. He had succeeded in solving the mystery of Shasta Sam's disappearance from the Fair Play—tracing it down to St. Elmo's cappers. The dark Hercules was not seriously injured—in fact, he has so far recovered from his wound that an hour ago he presided over a brace game of faro with all the ease and dignity of one to the manner born."

Trotter's keen eyes noted a look of relief on the face of the blonde giant.

"In addition to this," continued the mock Yankee, "Hunki Hans had learned that the ruffian known as Truthful Joe, wounded by you, had also been carried away and secreted by St. Elmo's men; that St. Elmo himself had recovered from the effects of your shot, and had dispatched a trusty messenger to summon Ugly Mike and the gang known as the Cripples; and that the gambler with Faro Frank and the hunchback, had retired to the small room back of the gaming tables for a conference."

"It was afterward developed that Shasta Sam was also in that room. It is wonderful, King Gabe, the bitterness of that man's hatred for you."

A grim smile partly disclosed the glowing white teeth of the alcalde. He motioned Trotter to go on.

"When I had learned these facts from Hunki Hans, I became pcssessed, apparently, of an overpowering desire to sleep. Forthwith, I stretched my weary length upon the hard floor, with my ear conveniently near a crevice in the slab partition."

"It was only by the closest listening that I could distinctly make out anything at all; but I did manage to hear enough to convince me of two or three facts."

"That your suspicions concerning St. Elmo are not without foundation I am satisfied."

The alcalde sprung to his feet.

"I was right?" he demanded, breathlessly.

"I think you were right; but—"

"Five years' patient trailing has brought its reward," muttered the blonde giant, huskily, as he strode to and fro across the rough floor of the slab shanty. "The case that baffled the best detective skill of the country is at its closing stage. Gold is an incentive; revenge, a lever a thousand-fold more powerful."

"Be seated," said the bogus Yankee, in authoritative tones. "I have got much to say and but little time."

Mechanically King Gabe obeyed, sinking almost unnerved upon a rude bench.

"This game must be played with the utmost care," resumed Trotter. "That St. Elmo intends to wage a bitter war against you, there is not a particle of reason to doubt. Then, too, the hunchback, having formed a bitter enmity toward me, has been delegated to take my life at the first opportunity. He seeks revenge for my having thwarted him at the moment when he had you suspended between heaven and earth. Shasta Sam is to see that your quietus is prompt and effectual."

"More than that I could not overhear. The four remained closeted together until an hour ago. About daybreak, with Hunki Hans, I made an effort to see you. Failing in that, we returned to the Fair Play. We decided that the first move was to get the hunchback out of the way. He is dangerous—far shrewder than St. Elmo himself. Accordingly, we spread the report that we had received the reward of five thousand dollars for the capture of Jabez Fouché, last night. Of course that brought St. Elmo and his cappers around us in a swarm, and we were quickly inveigled into a brace game of faro, Shasta Sam dealing."

"Losing the dust, I picked my quarrel with hunchback, with the intention of disabling or killing him then and there; but, bad and dangerous as the man is, I disliked the idea of deliberately shooting him down, and so gave him a fair and equal chance."

"Rather a hazardous proceeding, I fear," commented the alcalde, who had in a great measure recovered his wonted immobility. "This hunchback is a master of almost every weapon in vogue."

"So I have been informed by Rivers. Winchester are to be the weapons."

"That is worse yet; if there is a deadlier shot in Nowhar than this deformed wretch, it is not known. This, too, in the face of the fact that the camp has its full quota of crack marksmen."

"Really, the thing begins to look serious," murmured the mock Yankee. "But since I have blundered into the affair, I must trust to luck and a fair degree of proficiency in the use of the weapon to pull through right end up. Rivers informs me that you have a weapon of the kind named, and I shall have to request the loan of it."

"You can have it, most assuredly, together with what assistance I can render in the matter," promptly returned Gold Gabe. "Where is the meeting to take place?"

"At a point designated as the horseshoe plateau, up the mountain-side."

"Humph! the wily rascal again has you at a serious disadvantage, I fear. The horseshoe is certainly a strange place for such an affair. What are the conditions of this duel?"

"Can't say," replied Trotter, laconically. "They are to be fixed upon after we have reached the ground. Right here I have another favor to ask—that you act as my second in the affair."

"Willingly; for if I am not greatly mistaken there is something decidedly crooked back of all this. Evidently, Dunkle wishes to confer with some of his confederates before naming the terms. Was St. Elmo present?"

"No; Ugly Mike, chief of the Cripples, appeared while the game was in progress, and he and the gambler retired to the private apartment of the latter."

"Then, depend upon it, the hunchback wishes to talk the matter over with St. Elmo before meeting you," declared the alcalde. "Do you think it possible that they suspect anything?"

"Possible?—yes, it is more than possible; else why the hunchback's eagerness to get me out of the way?"

Gold Gabe's fingers beat an idle tattoo on the bench.

"You are assuming that St. Elmo, being the party we suspect him to be, has made a confidant of Dunkle?" he queried.

"Not only a confidant, but an ally."

"The assumption is plausible; yet, while their suspicions may be aroused as to our working in concert against them, can they be aware of our personal identity, or the basis of our operations?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," observed Trotter, reflectively. "The fact is, we are by no means certain in this matter ourselves. For the life of us, we couldn't tell whether we are on the trail or only working a blind lead. We are working at a disadvantage. If we were positive we had struck the trail at last, our movements could quickly be ridged of much cumbersome secrecy and unnecessary by-play. The developments of the next few hours promise to throw much light on the subject. We can only wait and watch."

Our allies are at work, and St. Elmo's every move will be promptly reported."

"You are right—we can but wait and watch," wearily assented the giant of the golden locks. "But time is flying. Two-thirds of the hour have rolled into the past. We must be moving toward the horseshoe."

Arising, Gold Gabe secured his Winchester, and with the mock Yankee left the cabin.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SPORTIVE SPORT.

THROUGHOUT the camp, with rapidity truly wondrous, had spread a report of Trotter's adventure at the Fair Play, of the challenge and its prompt acceptance by the hunchback.

Altogether out of the order of things orthodox in Nowhar was the conflict pending, and drawers of the long-bow quickly succeeded in so magnifying and exaggerating the exploits of the mock Yankee since his unheralded advent, that at the expiration of the hour the denizens of the gold-camp were gathered *en masse* on the horseshoe plateau, intent on witnessing the duel.

Boulder-strewn and barren of vegetation, this plateau was nothing more than a terrace, of the uniform width of a hundred yards, and a thousand in length, five hundred feet above the level of Nowhar, and curving in almost the exact shape of a mammoth horseshoe around the base of a bold, jutting, precipitous spur of the mountain.

A deadly place for such a combat, for the distance between the duelists would be short.

Among the last to reach the level of the plateau were the alcalde, Trotter, and the mine superintendent.

"By hemlock!" exclaimed the pseudo-Yankee, breathing hard from the rapid and arduous ascent, as the trio halted to view their surroundings. "Thar's th' hunchback an' St. Elmo over thar, confabbin'. Alcalde, they're beckonin' us to advance an' meet 'em half-way."

"Go you with Rivers here and try to get the bearings of this terrace," quietly returned the giant of the golden locks. "You will find an insight of the nature of the place an advantage, no doubt, when you are brought face to face with Dunkle. I will go forward alone, and make the best terms I can."

Nodding a careless assent, Trotter, with the superintendent, turned aside, while Gold Gabe, rifle in hand, strode forward to the point where stood St. Elmo and the hunchback, surrounded by a number of their friends.

"I suppose I can trust the men of the Yellow Boy to keep well together," grimly mused the alcalde, as he noted a suspicious massing of the rough element of the camp about twenty yards beyond the proprietor of the Fair Play. "It looks very much as if St. Elmo has prepared for a general conflict."

Walking calmly up to the little group, Gold Gabe, with a careless nod, dropped the butt of his Winchester to the ground and said, crisply:

"Gents, I respresent Mr. Trotter in th' affair ov honor about to occur; who among ye is th' second ov th' other party?"

Back into his speech had crept in a slight degree the peculiarities of the miners' dialect.

Julian St. Elmo trod lightly forward, doffing his white sombrero, a mocking smile curling his red lips.

"I have the pleasure to enjoy that peculiar distinction, my dear alcalde," he said.

"Very good," responded the blonde giant, running his eyes over the group until he encountered the fiery gaze of Shasta Sam. "Your man was the challenged party. I suppose you are ready to name th' conditions ov th' duel?"

"Quite ready; they are as follows: The two men are to be placed at the ends of the horseshoe, so that the base of this rocky spur is directly between them, a coin to be tossed for choice of ends; each man is to be armed with a Winchester rifle, fully charged; Shasta Sam is to be placed at the outer edge of the plateau yonder, equidistant from the two men, and in full view of each; at a signal shot from his revolver, the duelists are to be at liberty to proceed in any manner they see fit, with the restriction that neither attempts to leave the plateau without the other's consent; the battle to continue until both are satisfied."

"Satisfactory?"

"Perfectly."

"Then call up your man, and we'll settle the question of choice of positions; it is a comparatively small matter, but Dunkle here is determined that after the affair is over it shall not be said that he held any advantage over the stranger Yank."

"Don't fret yourself," retorted Gold Gabe

irately, as he turned to signal Trotter to approach. "As for our misshapen friend—isn't he crowin' at rather a premature stage ov th' game?"

St. Elmo laughed softly.

"Why, my dear alcalde, your Yankee friend really has no show at all in this here affair," he declared. "The little gentleman whom I have the honor to represent is right in having everything fair and open—that is all he wants, nothing more. His victory was assured from the moment the challenge was issued. All this is gone through with for the sake of form. When it comes to the scratch, he will pick off the Yank at leisure."

"And, right in the face of the solemnity of this occasion, allow me to remark that I have with me something like five thousand dollars, which say, at the generous odds of two to one, that my man will win the fight."

Trotter, in answer to the alcalde's signal, had rapidly approached, and was within hearing when the bantering offer was made.

"Neow don't yeou add insult to injury," he protested, striding quickly forward and facing the gambler, frantically sawing the air with his long arms as he spoke. "Whack up to him, alcalde; kiver every dollar yeou kin at them thar odds. By tar an' smoke! I guess somebody'll find they was kinder fooled w'en they monkey-ed 'ith the b'izness cend o' Jonathan Trotter."

"Say, yeou!"—staring straight into St. Elmo's eyes, his thin, sharp nose curling with contempt unutterable—"kiver thet! Money talks!"

Forth from an inner pocket, with a quick, impatient jerk, he drew a small packet, securely wrapped in oilcloth, which, with a careless gesture he flung into the hands of Gold Gabe.

"Thar yeou are, alcalde—thar's th' dust, an' et sez I'm a winner in this heur leetle scrimmage to come," he cried.

With eager, expectant faces the gamblers surrounding St. Elmo pressed forward as the giant of the golden locks carefully opened the oilcloth.

A package of bank-bills, those in view of large denomination, was revealed.

"Fall into line, yeou gallant sports o' Nowhar," continued the mock Yankee, in sharp, bantering tones. "Yeou, thet hev th' sand in yeour craws, trot forward—that's the good hard cash w'ot sez Jonathan Trotter, Esq., will salivate th' measly-mouth mounting kiote over thar, an' bear off th' proud pennant o' a galloious victory. Stride—glide—eny way at all so yeour dust kivers my money."

Attracted by the loud words and strange gestures of the mountain tramp, Nowhar's denizens began to gather closely around.

"Heavens! what is it?" exclaimed St. Elmo, starting back, his hands raised, his blue eyes opening wide in well-simulated surprise.

"Really, my dear alcalde, I fear we shall have to appeal to you for protection against this ranting, mouthing, what-may-it-be."

"Don't ye worry, dainty sport," coolly retorted Gold Gabe, his words almost drowned by a burst of sycophantic laughter from the gambler's heelers. "It, as ye are pleased to term him, is a man—a man ov sand."

"Ef ye mean business an' hev a few thousands to lose, hyar's yer chance. Ye asked for it, an' ye've got it. Hyar it is, as good an' honest as any coin ov th' realm can be. It will cover any amount ye or yer friends may care to hazard at the odds ye proposed. Do yer toes meet th' scratch or are ye goin' to climb down backward?"

And the giant of the golden locks, with a tantalizing smile, waved the racket of bank-bills to and fro within an inch of St. Elmo's nose.

A hot flush suffused the gambler's face.

"Five thousand dollars that Dunkle wins the fight," he promptly reiterated, producing a plethoric wallet.

"Covered!" laconically exclaimed Gold Gabe, counting two thousand five hundred dollars.

"Who holds the stakes?"

"How will Sweet By-and-By suit?" queried St. Elmo, running his eyes over the crowd until his glance fell upon the worthy named.

"Suits me to a dot," returned the alcalde, placing his money in the miner's hands.

For the next few minutes the giant of the golden locks was kept busy backing bets at the odds named. In the opinion of the average Nowharite Trotter was a doomed man.

After the sportive side of the affair had been duly settled, St. Elmo drew a silver dollar from his pocket.

"Now, Yank, make your call as she goes up—heads or tails?" he exclaimed.

"Hold a minute!" cried Trotter, excitedly.

"I'll jest go yeou a leetle stake o' a thousand thet I win choice o' posish—th' alcalde to hold stakes. Are yeou game?"

"At this rate you won't leave much for your heirs to quarrel over!" sneered St. Elmo. "Put up your money—anything from one to five thousand."

"I reckon a thousand is enough," calmly responded the mock Yankee. "If I lose clear through, there'll be enough left to grub-stake some budding Blackstone. My dust is in the alcalde's hands."

Covering the last bet, the gambler stepped back a pace and raised his right hand, revealing the silver coin between his thumb and forefinger.

"Now, Yank, for the last time—heads or tails?" he cried sharply, as the coin spun swiftly upward.

"Heads!" called Trotter, as the now descending coin struck the earth.

"Heads it is!" announced a dozen voices, as the excited miners clustered around the silver coin.

With just a trace of annoyance perceptible in the action, St. Elmo daintily twirled his tawny mustache.

"My dear alcalde, I see your skeleton friend has won," he observed, easily. "Just turn the thousand into his hands."

"Not jest yet, King Gabe," spoke up Trotter, crisply. "I don't like th' installment plan—jest wait till th' performance is over; then I'll take th' entire pot."

Gold Gabe nodded assent.

"Having won th' choice o' positions, I select th' south eend o' the boss-shoe," continued the pseudo-Yankee, coolly. "Alcalde, will you go down with me an' let me into the p'int o' th' leetle brigazee? Yaas?—I thought yeou w'u'd."

"Say, yeou—St. Elmo! trot th' deformed critter 'round to his post, an' take 'im through his 'Now I lay me,' etc. Yeou might send a squad down to sum nice sunny spot in the valley to fix up his final two-by-five resting-place; it'll save time fer the mourners by and by."

"An' yeou, Bummer Bob, o' th' Stanislaus"—wheeling abruptly upon Shasta Sam, who stood with his arms folded lightly across his massive chest, watching with a cynical smile the varying phases of the affair—"yeou amble gently to th' p'int assigned yeou eont thar, an' w'en we hev got a good an' ready let go yeour gun. Be keerful, too, thet yeou don't gitskeered an' blow th' hull top o' yeour head off a-givin' th' signal."

"Fol-de-rol enough, Winding-Blades!" sharply enunciated the hunchback desperado, biting his thin lips until the blood trickled from the corners of his mouth, in an attempt to repress an outburst of rage. "I'm perfectly agreed with you on the subject of a grave; but I reckon we can wedge your bones into some crevice among the rocks—it will save the boys the thankless task of an hour's digging."

"It's useless to deny that you're gritty; but bravery will avail you nothing—I shall scatter your meager brains to the four winds without an atom of trouble."

"Tut, tut! don't yeou do it! Sech a colossal brain-power a-floatin' 'round at large might give th' Territory th' big-head an' forever blight its prospects!"

And the mock Yankee grinned maliciously.

"Enough of this pleasantry, gentlemen," said St. Elmo, sternly. "It is obvious to all that Dunkle will be the winner in this fight; and I am glad that it is so—not that I am in the least prejudiced against Mr. Trotter, understand me, but because my sympathies are naturally with friends before strangers."

"Alcalde, put your man; I will see that mine is quickly in position."

Satisfied, apparently, with having had the last word, the mock Yankee turned away with Gold Gabe, casting a last glance over his shoulder at Shasta Sam as they strode rapidly toward the southern terminus of the so-called horseshoe.

"King Gabe, there's something rotten in Denmark," he muttered, when they were well away from the group.

"I agree with you—St. Elmo has some underhand move afoot," promptly returned the giant of the golden locks. "But the nature of that move I cannot guess, unless it be to precipitate a free fight at the close of this duel."

Trotter shook his head.

"That is not it. Whatever the gambler's scheme may be, it is directed against you alone—I could see that in the exultant gleam of his eye when he looked at you."

"When you rejoin the crowd, keep your weapons ready, and don't get too far away from

Shasta Sam. Keep within easy pistol-shot of him, at all events."

"You think—"

"I conjecture nothing—I am simply advising a safe course."

In silence, the two men strode on to the end of the plateau. There the blonde giant handed Trotter the Winchester, and spoke rapidly for a moment in low tones.

"It is a bad business, I will admit," said the mock Yankee, at the conclusion of Gold Gabe's remarks. "But I am going to do my best to teach this desperado a lasting lesson. Perhaps I may open the eyes of these Nowharites—who knows?"

"There is more in you than than they suspect," remarked the giant. "But this hunchback is a bad man and a dead shot. Look to it that he secures no greater advantage over you. Aside from this, I can only wish you success."

A hearty clasp of the hands, and the alcalde turned and walked rapidly back to the crowd congregated on the edge of the plateau, opposite to the jutting face of the bluff.

St. Elmo was already there.

Raising his revolver, Shasta Sam fired in the air, the signal agreed upon.

CHAPTER VIII.

DECOYED.

Huddled together within the small apartment in the rear of the Fair Play, just before the time set for the hostile meeting between the bogus Yankee and the hunchback desperado, were three men—fellows whose faces alone were sufficient to stamp them as hardened villains.

Prominent among the ill-favored trio was Ugly Mike, the leader of the Cripples.

A short, squat, broad-shouldered ruffian, in the attire of an honest miner, and "armed to the teeth," as the saying goes, was this chief of the desperadoes.

His head was crowned with a shock of matted, unkempt red hair, while a heavy beard of the same fiery hue, foul with the tobacco-juice continually oozing from the corners of his capacious mouth, covered the greater portion of his face.

Under his beetling brows gleamed a pair of small, blood-shot black eyes; and at some period in his eventful career his nose had been the unfortunate recipient of a blow of some sort, which had flattened it out in a way more picturesque than beautiful, adding greatly to his general repulsiveness.

The reputation borne by this bestial desperado accorded well with his personal appearance.

Closeted with Ugly Mike were two of his fellows, each equally as unsavory in looks and in character.

"It are a bold game we hev ter play, boyees," mumbled the chief of the Cripples, in hushed, barely audible tones, leaning over the rough deal table at which he was seated until his head almost touched those of his companions. "An' it are risky, too, an' none but ther gamest ov ther gang hev a finger in ther pie."

"But I knowed I c'u'd sw'ar by Wheezy Ben an' Pious Pete, an' I hes called yer hyer ter deal yer yer hands."

"Yer knows jest how matters stand atwixt St. Elmo and the alcalde?"

"We does!" cautiously chorused the Cripples.

"Wal, then yer hain't 't all s'prised w'en I tells yer thet ther dainty sport are fixin' ter guv ther giant a sick'nin' swipe, then his last sickness, be yer?"

"Not 't all," in duet.

"Dern me, ef yer hain't long-headed cusses, both ov yer!" exclaimed Ugly Mike, lost in patronizing admiration. "Wal, wal! who 'u'd 'a' thort et? An' St. Elmo hev bin playin' et es fine es ther p'int ov a rib-tickler, too!"

Both ruffians smiled broadly at this flaming tribute to the acuteness of their perceptive faculties.

"Reckon we kin see through a knot-hole so far es ther next one," complacently remarked Pious Pete.

"So yer kin," graciously admitted the chief. "An' out ov ther hull gang thar hain't two men w'ot kin handle this hyar leetle job fer St. Elmo eny better than either one ov yer fellers. An' thet are jest w'ot I told him, not ten minutes ago, w'en he asked about yer."

"Yer are ready ter do a leetle lively rustlin' fer a couple ov gold 'slugs' apiece, I reckon?"

The two men nodded assent so quickly that their heads came rather violently into contact.

"In course yer are—ye'r jest a-jumpin' at ther chaine," laughed Ugly Mike, softly, as the pair of ruffians recoiled, staring at each other; "but yer needn't either butt out ther other's brains a-sayin' so."

"But ter git right down ter bizness, ther trick ter be worked are jest this: Last night thet purty female, w'ot hes turned ther heads ov half ther chaps in camp, arriv' in Nowhar. Thet gal are ther alcalde's sister, an' she air now over at his lay-out. St. Elmo wants her snaked off up inter ther hills an' hid away. Are yer game ter do et an' keep yer moutas shet arterward?"

Wheezy Ben's beady little eyes expanded, and he stared first at the speaker, then at Pious Pete, while he dubiously shook his head.

"St. Elmo's neat little scheme can't be worked," he declared slowly. "Fifty yaller slugs w'u'dn't tempt me ter buckle on an' take holt ov ther job. A feller's life w'u'dn't be w'uth a empty ca'tridge-shell, fer w'en yer steal thet gal away yer start King Gabe on ther war-path. An' yer knows him."

"Benjy are a-singin' my tune edzactly," affirmed Pious Pete. "I w'u'd a heap sight ruther tackle a hungry grizzly than ter git ther alcalde r'iled at me. Dern my cats! ef he hain't a genooine cyclone, I nevyer see'd one!"

Leaning far back from the table, Ugly Mike stared at the lesser ruffians, his expression one of ineffable disgust.

"Great Scott!" he growled; "an' I war fool enuff ter count on yer es men ov sand!"

Utterly crestfallen, the two desperadoes followed the scornful remark with lugubrious silence.

"See hyar, galoots, yer squealed afore yer war hurted, both ov yer," continued the chief a moment later, resuming his confidential air and again leaning over the table until within a few inches of his *confreres*. "Yer hain't bin asked ter run a particle ov risk."

"Ther gal are ter be got at by stratagy, not by force, an' in jest sech a way thet ther alcalde can't lay her disappearance at ther door ov eny one or two pussons. Jest listen a bit till I 'loosidate."

"A half-hour from now ther camp will be deserted, fer everybody w'ot kin shake a leg at all will climb up ther mountain-side ter see Hump Dunkle lay ther Yank by ther heels."

"St. Elmo, bein' a derned slick cuss at figgerin' out sech things, see'd in a minute thet this war ther accepted time, as ther passon usty say, fer strikin' ther fust big blow at King Gabe, an' 'cordin'ly called me in ter superintend this abductin' ov ther gal."

"Now, pards, ther way hes bin made easy fer ther trick, fer ther cappers ov ther dainty sport hev spread a report ov ther comin' duel all through ther camp, twistin' up ther leetle scrimmage until at fust glance et looks es ef ther affair 'u'd blossom inter ther biggest sort ov a fight, an' tharby drawin' ter ther hess-shoe plateau every soul but us fellers, ther gal, an' a spy w'ot hes bin sot ter watchin' ther alcalde's lay-out."

"Jest es soon es ther way are puffectly cl'ar, ther spy 'll report ter us. Then all we hev ter do, are fer one ov us fellers ter go ter ther gal with a cock-an'-bull story w'ot 'll draw her away from ther cabin ter a spot whar ther rest ov us are in waitin', w'en we kin pounce ont'er her an' escort her off ter a secure hidin'-place in ther hills. Arter thet, we kin break fer camp, an' reach ther plateau afore ther sarkus up thar are eended."

"Oh, ther hull snap are es soft es dough, an' ef yer don't call fer a hand in ther game, yer'll miss ther biggest chainece ov yer lives, so yer will; fer ther yaller slugs anted by ther dainty sport hain't a sarcumstance ter ther wealth ter be captured in ther job w'en ther bluffin' are all done, fer arter we git ther gal inter our clutches oncet, St. Elmo 'll hev ter shower out ther dust afore we guv her up."

"Now, w'ot sez yer, Wheezy Ben, an' you, Pious Pete?"

A broad grin gradually spread over the fat, flaccid features of the ruffian first addressed.

"W'ot sez I?" he hoarsely gurgled, waving his hand tragically. "Pard Mike, sence thar are no bullets to be encountered an' stopped by our corporosities, I want a finger in ther jack-pot ter be scooped; an' ef Wheezy Ben Meggins can't wheedle ther bonnie lassie inter leavin' ther pertectin' roof ov her big brother's cabin, an' elopin' off inter ther woods or ther hills on a purty fool's errant, et are 'cos he hes lost his youthful b'uty an' winnin' elerquence. Ef—"

"Oh, shet up, you!" interrupted Pious Pete, with a sulphurous oath. "Ov course yer kin count on us, Mike. But as fer this hyar fat friend hyar, shet him up afore he sp'iles every-thing 'ith his mouthin's. Dern little stock I take in him, anyway."

"Never mind him, Pete," said Ugly Mike, in a pacific tone. "Let Ben hev his way ef he enjoys et—et can't hurt anything, yer know."

Hark! thar are ther spy's signal! He are at ther door—a sign thet ther way are cl'ar."

The door swung open ere he ceased speaking, and Cockney Jim, the bartender, glided into the apartment.

"Der camp's deserted, gents, han' der gal's halone," he announced. "St. Elmo's last order was that yer strike swift hand sure, or heat lead w'en 'e got back from der plateau."

Silence deep and unbroken brooded over the deserted gold-camp. Within the narrow confines of Nowhar but a single living, moving figure was to be seen—Wheezy Ben Meggins, ambling along at a sharp trot toward the cabin-home of the giant of the golden locks.

Alternately groaning and cursing in subdued accents, that for the sake of appearances he must feign haste, and for once move rapidly in the now broiling rays of the sun, the corpulent rascal headed straight for the open door of the alcalde's cabin, every ounce of his superfluous flesh a-quiver and burning, and the perspiration trickling freely in oily drops down his face.

The goal reached, he rapped sharply with his knuckles, then withdrew a pace, pushed back his greasy slouch hat and nervously mopped his brow with his shirt-sleeve.

A moment of waiting; then a starry-eyed vision of loveliness, that fairly astounded the hardened wretch, appeared at the door.

"Mornin', m-miss," he exclaimed, jerking out the words with a painful effort, and clutching absently at his hat as he awkwardly attempted a bow.

The girl, an expression of mingled surprise and expectancy showing on her face, returned the salutation.

"B-be yer ther alcalde's s-sister?"

"I am; why do you ask?" was the quick response.

Wheezy Ben looked around, hesitated, then sought to cover his confusion by again applying his sleeve to his fevered brow.

"I h-hate ter s-say et, m-miss; but I hev b-bad news fer yer. Now, do-don't get excited; j-jest be p-patient 'ith m-me, fer I hev ther tis-phthisic an' c-can't talk f-fast. Yes, I hev b-bad news fer yer."

With a swift, impetuous movement, the startled girl advanced a trifle, a look of fear creeping over her pretty face.

"Bad news for me!" she exclaimed, anxiously. "Speak, man—is my brother—"

"Thar! she hev gone an' guessed et!" broke in the ruffian, the pained tone in which the words were uttered in perfect keeping with his facial expression. "Onhappy Ben Meggins! w'y, oh! w'y war yer sent with s-sech an orful t-tale ter distress this b-b'utiful c-critter!"

The rascal's adroitly couched apostrophe was not without its effect.

One fleeting instant the girl reeled back, her slender hands pressed tightly to her painfully throbbing heart. The look of unutterable horror, distress and despair in her dark eyes would surely have moved a being less hardened than the brutal wretch before her.

Then, with a suddenness that fairly startled Wheezy Ben, every trace of weakness vanished as if by magic; her slender, willowy figure was drawn erect; her tightly clinched hands dropped to her sides, her black eyes filled with a curious sparkling light, and her face became set and stern.

"Speak out, man—I am listening," she said, in cold, abrupt tones.

"Very well, m-miss," wheezingly uttered the ruffian, gasping for breath, and clutching at his throat as if in the last stages of suffocation. "Ther good Lord knows B-Ben Meggins are g-glad ter s-see yer g-gritty an' able ter stand ther b-bad news he b-brings."

"M-miss, ther alcalde, yer b-brother, hev bin sh-shot, an' b-badly w-wounded. Et 'll k-kill 'im ter b-bring 'im b-here. He hes s-sent m-me ter lead yer ter him."

A great shudder ran through the slender form of the girl; a single sharp, convulsive sob broke the oppressive silence.

"Wait!"

The one word, and she abruptly retreated into the cabin, closing the door.

Ejecting from his capacious maw an amber rill of tobacco-juice, Wheezy Ben blinked his eyes knowingly at the rough wall.

"A sly ole galoot are you, Benjy—a very sly ole cuss," he mused; "but look out thet this hyar purty leetle gal with ther bright black eyes don't lay yer by ther heels. She are a daisy—a puffed hummer."

A moment later, just as the corpulent fraud had succeeded in distorting his features with

an expression of settled woe, the blonde giant's sister appeared from the cabin.

"Come!" she ejaculated, hastily knotting the ribbons of her wide straw hat beneath her shapely chin. "Come—I am ready; let us go."

Nonplused at the coolness and abruptness of the girl's words, Wheezy Ben hesitated a moment, then started to lead the way through the deserted camp, limping violently.

"I'm a puffed misabul wrack, m-miss," he gurgled, with a dolorous attempt at a sigh, as he noticed the impatience with which his victim regarded his shambling gait. "T-time war, m-miss, w'en I war es spruce an' es b-brash es eny ov them; but B-Ben Meggins are past ther p-prime ov his oncet n-noble m-manhood, an' every j'int in his pore ole c-carkase are racked 'ith p-pain."

"But w'en ther alcalde l-looked up at m-me 'ith sech a s-sorrowin', pleadin' look in them thar b-big b-blue eyes ov his'n, an' sez, s-sez he, 'M-most trusted f-friend, go b-bring my s-sister ter s-soothe my d-dyin' minutes; w'y, I j-jest c-c'd'n't refuse, an' away I kem, fergettin' my own p-pain an' s-sufferin'. I j-jes—"

Seized here with a skillfully feigned parody of violent coughing and strangling, the ruffian tore feebly at his throat with his grimy hands, and staggered weakly along—inwardly chuckling at the pity evoked from the alcalde's sister.

"Poor fellow!" murmured the girl, never for an instant suspecting the true character of her guide, and too dazed and grief-stricken by his skillfully concocted story to note her surroundings as they hastened onward.

Her thoughts were constantly with the stricken giant. Biting her nether lip to keep back her tears, she followed in the footsteps of treacherous Wheezy Ben. A few minutes sufficed to see them half a mile from the camp. At a lonely spot between the hills the ruffian suddenly turned from the faint trail and entered a narrow canyon.

Here their path was rough, dark and dreary, the sunlight being excluded by massive, overhanging walls of rock.

The girl shuddered; a sense of impending peril oppressed her. Slipping her hands into the folds of her dress, she nervously clutched the butts of a pair of trusty revolvers.

As they pushed onward the way grew rougher and darker; the canyon contracted in width, and the giant walls seemed to meet far overhead.

"Where are we going?" suddenly cried the girl as they reached an abrupt bend in the canyon.

"Patience, leetle g-gal—we're m-most thar," returned Wheezy Ben, evasively, as he disappeared around a jutting rock. "Watch w-whar yer step, miss—ther s-stones are slippery an' yer may fall," he called back.

With her eyes cast down, the girl passed around the angle. A moment later she missed the footfalls of her guide, and at once looked up to find herself confronted by two villainous-looking men.

They were none other than Ugly Mike and his ally, Pious Pete.

One glance at the evil, leering face of the chief of the Cripples, and with a wild cry of alarm the girl turned to flee down the canyon.

Wheezy Ben, whom she had passed, adroitly blocked the way.

"Quite a surprise party, hain't et, mum?" he cried, a mocking grin spreading over his oily face, a devilish light dancing in his beady black eyes.

"Now yer hev her, Mike, safe an' sound," continued the fat ruffian, in a gurgling voice. "An', darn me! ef I ever see'd a purtier bit ov kaliker an' ribbons than she are. An' she mo-sied right along arter me, too, jest ez ef I war a Baptist parson. Oh, I'll bu'st!"

And the rough quivered violently with suppressed mirth.

"Gals like her is ez sca'ce ez four-leaf clover," observed Ugly Mike, striding forward. "Stop yer foolin', Benjy; le's git her under kiver up hyar, an' putt back fer ther plateau. Et won't do fer King Gabe ter 'spicion thet we hed any-thing ter do 'ith ther girl's makin' herself sca'ce at camp, or Nowhar 'll be too hot ter hold us."

Confronting the apparently helpless girl, the chief thrust out his grimy hand to grasp her arm—only to start back with a hoarse oath, with the deadly muzzles of a pair of self-cocking revolvers staring him full in the face.

Swift as thought itself had been the action of the girl—so deftly performed, in fact that she was about to assume the defensive.

"Stand back, you scoundrel! keep your hands off and allow me to pass from this place unmolested or I'll kill you as I would a crawling ser-

pent," she cried, the words coming in calm, measured accents over the glittering lengths of her weapons.

"Jewhillerkens!" gasped Ugly Mike, abruptly ducking his head, as if to avoid a blow. "Benjy, yer hes corraled a puffed screamer—dern my cats ef yer hain't! Close in, galoots, an' take her we'pons!"

"Sthand chust vere you vas, mine tear frients or py chimminetti! you vas petter order goffins fer t'ree!" cried a stern voice at the bend in the canyon, and the Teutonic tramp, Hunki Hans, slowly advanced, his short, heavy "sixes" raised and at full cock, his mild blue eyes gleaming brightly.

"Mees Morton, ef t'ey vas so mooch as der leedle fingers move, shoot."

Ugly Mike and his allies exchanged glances of alarm.

The next instant the chief of the Cripples placed his fingers against his lips and blew a loud, piercing blast, which echoed and re-echoed up and down the gloomy canyon.

"We shall see!" he muttered, grimly.

CHAPTER IX.

HOW THE DUEL ENDED.

A HUSH fraught with expectancy came over the motley group upon the plateau's verge as the sharp crack of Shasta Sam's revolver died away.

The dark giant had taken up a position directly opposite to the jutting face of the towering spar, midway of the horseshoe, in full view of the two duelists. A few paces distant, between him and the crowd, were Gold Gabe, St. Elmo, Faro Frank and the mine superintendent.

With revolver uplifted, Shasta Sam stared fixedly for a full minute at the distant hunchback.

Then Dunkle was seen to throw himself flat upon his stomach among the huge boulders, with his rifle in position for instant use.

On the other hand, Jonathan Trotter remained erect, his rifle carelessly grounded, engaged to all appearances in a close survey of the trend of the plateau.

Satisfied, apparently, with the action of the hunchback, the dark Hercules wheeled half around, facing in the direction of Trotter, then with a careless downward sweep of his long arm restored the weapon to his belt.

Handling his Winchester with painful awkwardness, the pseudo-Yankee hesitated a moment, then walked forward with long, deliberate strides.

Honest Jeems Rivers clinched his horny hands in sheer vexation.

"Alcalde, what say you now?" exclaimed St. Elmo, exultantly, as the quick eyes noted the move. "Your man is actually the most verdant specimen of the Yankee tribe I ever saw. He don't know enough to get behind a rock and stay there. No, no! he must needs walk right into good range and let Dunkle toast him to his heart's content. Nowhar's first duel is degenerating into a mere farce—a butchery."

"Don't bother your head about that thar Yank, dainty sport," retorted the blonde giant, with provoking coolness. "It's pretty safe to say he isn't as green as he looks. We can't tell how much experience he's had in jest sech affairs as this. He is a mountain tramp, you know, an' mountain tramps are sometimes derved deceiving critters."

"Then, too, in ructions ov this sort no man can tell who is to be th' victor. It is all onsartainty until th' fight is fought, th' last round fired, an' everything ready for th' obsequies. An' even then you can't sometimes tell."

"Now, look over thar, will you? Th' Yank has made his fu'st move in th' game, an' 'e smacks ov a long head. Hidden from sight behind that big boulder in th' chain extendin' across to th' outer edge of the plateau, th' critter'll have things pretty much his own way, an' will play with th' leetle hunchback purty much as a cat toys with the mouse safe under her claws."

"Taken all around, I give it as my opinion that Mr. Dunkle will have to get up an' fairly hump himself even to dislodge the Yank."

There was a ring in the alcalde's words expressive of a great degree of satisfaction.

The position taken by Trotter was beyond dispute a strong one. With this unpleasant fact staring him in the face, Julian St. Elmo gnawed savagely at the ends of his tawny mustache, and cast an anxious glance in the direction of the hunchback desperado.

That worthy was creeping cautiously from rock to rock, working slowly toward the edge of the plateau.

"If he makes the point he seems to be aiming for—the long, flat boulder at the very edge—he

will likely have the Yankee at a sharp disadvantage," muttered Faro Frank, in tones so low that none but St. Elmo heard. "I judge a shot from that quarter would be a disagreeable surprise to the tenderfoot."

"True," assented the gambler, in tones equally guarded, as he drew his *confrere* aside. "But I fear we are playing a losing game. If this Trotter is half as shrewd as I begin to suspect he is, the jig is well nigh up with Dunkle."

"How so, Jule?"

"I base my conclusion upon this fact: Just beyond that chain of rock sheltering Trotter, a gully sufficiently deep to afford him concealment cuts across the plateau. If he has been keen enough to recognize its advantages and taken to it, as I suspect he has, he is even now in a position to open fire on Dunkle when the latter least expects a shot."

"I see," said Faro Frank, with a significant nod. "If the Yankee has crept down the gully, Dunkle is in danger of a death-shot every time he leaves one rock to creep to another on his way to the plateau's edge to bring his antagonist into range."

"Exactly. If we could only hit upon some way to put our misshapen friend on his guard, I believe his final success would be assured; for, pitted man against man, there is to my mind not the slightest doubt that the Yankee would be doomed. Dunkle is merely playing for time now. The affair must be prolonged to give Ugly Mike and his allies a fair chance to work out their plans below."

"We must warn Dunkle in some way, for taken in all its bearings the affair promises to be a very profitable one if he succeeds in killing his man."

"In the first place, it will effectually dispose of Mr. Trotter, a character entirely too curious and too prying to suit our somewhat fastidious tastes, and at the same time enrich us to the extent of some five or six thousand dollars."

"Then, too, it is a direct and bitter blow to the alcalde; for at one stroke we deprive him of an ally dangerous to us, and open up the way for Ugly Mike to steal the girl."

"And if the Yankee wins the fight—what then?" asked Faro Frank.

"We still have the girl in our possession—just now the most important consideration of all, to my mind. Of course, the money staked, as well as the future services of the Yankee, would be lost. For the life of the hunchback I care nothing. It is only for the sake of the money up, and from a desire to rid the camp of the Yankee that I wish to see the infernal little beast win the fight."

"And for these selfsame reasons I want to put him on his guard against the move probable upon the part of Trotter; but just how to work the trick is a problem too deep for me to solve, though as a general thing I rather pride myself on being pretty apt in such delicate wrinkles."

"I have nothing to suggest," said Faro Frank, musingly. "The fact is, Gold Gabe and his friends are watching us so closely that none but a master-hand could hope to work the trick undetected. Shasta Sam might be tried."

"The suggestion is good, at all events," returned St. Elmo, looking over his shoulder for the dark Hercules. "Whatever is to be done must be done quickly, for I have an intuitive feeling that the cursed Yank has adopted the very plan of action we have the most reason to fear. Where is the giant? he was here a moment ago."

"He has been back among the crowd; he is coming yonder." And with his left hand the wounded gambler beckoned Shasta Sam.

"There is yet another thing that I do not like the absence of Hunki Hans, Trotter's Dutch pard, from the plateau at this time," continued St. Elmo, hurriedly, as the dark Hercules slowly approached. "Did he remain in camp to look after the girl, or is his absence due to too much whisky?"

In either case, he would prove but a trifle in the way of Ugly Mike and his allies," declared Faro Frank.

"True enough; and the chief of the Cripples has a firm belief in the truth of the saying that dead men tell no tales. If the valiant Hans really remained behind to watch over the alcalde's interests he will hardly live to tell what happened."

"But Shasta is here—not a word about the girl, Frank."

As the dark Hercules passed the giant of the golden locks, their eyes met in a single intense glance.

The next instant the heavy report of Trotter's rifle rung out across the plateau, hushing for a moment the voices of the crowd.

"We are too late!" exclaimed St. Elmo, in low, intense tones, prefacing the words with an oath. "See! that faint wreath of smoke off yonder at the very edge of the plateau marks the Yankee's position. He has taken advantage of the gully, just as I suspected. The hunchback's only hope is to remain quiet until Trotter grows restless or reckless and shows his precious person."

"Look! he has no hope—the fight is over!" cried Faro Frank, clutching St. Elmo's arm, and pointing across the level of the plateau, as a hoarse shout went up from the crowd. "A single shot has forever settled the matter. From now until eternity Jonathan Trotter has naught to fear from the hunchback!"

And to all appearances the wounded gambler spoke the truth; for, extended at full length, flat on his back upon the hard, dry earth of the level, there was the misshapen desperado, shot down while creeping from rock to rock.

Confident that his single shot had ended the duel, the pseudo-Yankee sprang into view, hurrying forward with his rifle at a trail.

Instantly the crowd became wild with excitement, not unmixed with exultation. The hunchback had been heartily disliked and despised because of his contentious nature, and from the beginning popular sympathy had to a great extent been with the whimsical mountain tramp.

During the tumult that ensued, a pellet of crumpled paper was thrust into the alcalde's hand. A quick glance over his shoulder failed to discover the source of the surreptitious message.

With an ejaculation of surprise, Gold Gabe covertly unrolled the paper, which proved to be a leaf torn at random from a memorandum-book.

Penciled on it, in scrawling, irregular characters, were the words:

"Jessica is probably imperiled by a plot of St. Elmo, as Ugly Mike, Wheezy Ben and Pious Pete, three of the most desperate of the camp pests known as the Cripples, are not here. Take or send down at once a party strong enough to beat off the outlaws should they attempt anything crooked."

Anonymous, and surreptitiously delivered though it was, the warning had a marked effect upon the giant of the golden locks.

Hard by stood Jeems Rivers, narrowly watching every move of St. Elmo. In a moment, Gold Gabe had pushed his way through the surging crowd to the side of the mine superintendent.

Hurriedly, and with cautious utterance, the contents of the mysterious message were imparted to the latter.

"Oho, oho!" grated Rivers, shutting his teeth hard. "I kin see ther finger ov thet artful cuss in ther absence ov ther three cut-throats mentioned. Shall I pick six good men an' putt off fer ther cabin at a double-quick? You are needed hyar."

"Yes; pick your men and get down to the camp just as quick as you can," returned the alcalde. "I will follow you just as soon as I can. This matter here is almost over. If you find anything wrong below, signal me with three pistol-shots."

A quick nod, and the mine superintendent pushed his way through the crowd.

Crumbling the bit of paper into a wad, Gold Gabe dropped it into his pocket, and turned to note the movements of Trotter.

But little time had been consumed in learning the contents of the message and in starting Rivers back to the camp; yet the giant of the golden locks found that the mock Yankee had crossed the level and reached the side of his vanquished foe.

A moment the mountain tramp stood calmly gazing down at the pallid face of the hunchback, then wheeled abruptly and faced the throng that had followed in his footsteps.

"Wal, gents, it do appear as if th' scrimmago was over," he remarked, dryly. "I hain't sayin' it in a boastful way, but yeour leetle pard o' th' crooked-back wasn't much o' a man, arter all; an' if he was as good as th' camp c'u'd show, it hain't sayin' much for Nowhar. An' thar hain't no use o' any wry faces or hard feelin's over th' matter, either."

"But I didn't lay myself out to slaughter him; I kalkulate yeon'll find a hole drilled through his right shoulder, an' that is about all th' wuss off he is fer tryin' to amuse hisself at th' expense o' Jonathan Trotter. If he has had his fun, he is welcome to it."

"Neow, some o' yeou fellers thet are handy at sech things git to work an' fix him up. I reckon he wasn't so eternal bad but he had some friends among yeou."

"As for th' money up, by hemlock! I kalki-

late I'll take it. A quick eye an' a steady hand have turned on me th' smiles o' fickle Dame Fortune. List, you sportivo sports! if you have aught to say, speak, or forever hold yeour peace!"

Lightly and unflinchingly had the mock Yankee spoken, his words at times bordering on the reckless, and kindling in the breasts of many of Nowhar's citizens a spark of resentment; yet, in the depths of his coldly gleaming gray eyes, in the peculiar smile hovering upon his thin lips, in the easy poise of his wiry form, there was something which held the turbulent spirits in check.

"We have no wish to dispute your claim—the money is yours," uttered St. Elmo, coldly. "You have won the fight; but, if you will take a bit of advice, you will make yourself scarce in Nowhar. Ours is a quiet, law-abiding camp, and we have no manner of use for gentlemen of your ilk."

"Opinions differ," retorted Trotter. "It sorter runs in my head that Nowhar will yet have cause to shake hands with he self because o' my bein' heur."

"Wind enough, gents," interposed the alcalde, impatiently. "This hyar unfortunate affair has been settled, an' it's high time we were gettin' back into th' valley. Who knows?—p'raps th' durned Cripples—Ugly Mike, Wheezy Ben an' Pious Pete, have carried off th' bull camp."

So unexpected by St. Elmo was this thrust, that for a moment he was thrown off his guard; his face plainly betraying alarm as he retreated a trifle, while his slender hands dropped swiftly upon the butts of the revolvers belted to his waist.

At the same instant the sharp report of a firearm of some sort echoed faintly from the valley below.

Its effect upon Gold Gabe was extremely startling.

A smothered cry of rage burst from his throat; his blue eyes glowed madly, and with a single swift, convulsive bound, he cleared the space between himself and the gambler.

St. Elmo stood spellbound, a look of horror on his ashen face, utterly powerless to stir.

"Your life shall pay for your treachery, dainty sport!" hissed the giant of the golden locks, every fiber of his massive form quivering with passion. "You haven't a minute to live! If you've a word to say, say it!"

The gambler moved not a muscle. He strove to speak, but not a sound escaped his palsied tongue. Known to the camp as a man of iron nerve, of desperate courage, he had at last weakened in the face of peril, and the prestige that had been his pride was gone.

A tragedy was imminent. The crowd revealed its appreciation of the fact by a strange hush.

"Speak out, you treacherous devil!" grated the giant alcalde once more, his long forefinger playing lightly against the trigger of his self-cocking weapon. "What have your hired assassins done with my sister? Speak, quickly—or never!"

Silence, dead and unbroken, followed the slowly enunciated demand. The lurid glow in the eyes of the blonde giant deepened. Like a flash of light, his glittering weapon was raised until its deadly muzzle-bore fell between the glassy, horror-frozen eyes of the doomed gambler.

A single instant, then the herculean form of Shasta Sam, the man from Cimbar, shot out from the front rank of the crowd, as if hurled from a catapult, alighting squarely at the side of the enraged alcalde.

Ere his feet had fairly touched the earth, the dark giant's long right arm swung upward in a sharp, swift stroke at the pistol hand of Gold Gabe.

Too late; the leveled weapon exploded spitefully, and Julian St. Elmo dropped in a writhing heap, a short, gasping cry issuing from his tightly-drawn lips.

With the abruptness of thought, the giant of the golden locks wheeled and faced Shasta Sam.

With eyes blazing with intense rage, their revolvers in hand ready for instant use, the Rival Giants for a full minute glared fiercely at each other.

Then the impending storm burst in all its fury.

CHAPTER X.

HUNKI HANS SHOWS HIS HAND.

THE sudden appearance of Hunki Hans, the mountain tramp, around the bend in the canyon.

was, to Ugly Mike and his two allies, a surprise decidedly disagreeable.

From the loquacious, but hardly veracious Wheezy Ben, the chief of the Cripples had received an artistically amplified account of the parts played by Trotter and the Teuton in the difficulty with the hunchback desperado at the Fair Play a short while before, and he had at once jumped to the conclusion that the two mountain tramps would be pretty tough customers to encounter, even with the odds largely against them.

Then, too, the ready recognition of the decoyed girl by Hunki Hans was not reassuring to the cunning ruffian. And both the actions and the words of the corpulent Teuton, as he hastened toward the girl, pointed plainly to the fact that he was determined to make a desperate fight, if need be, to effect her rescue.

Such a conflict as that promised was not exactly to the taste of Ugly Mike, desperate and lawless as he was, and he instantly decided upon a plan of action likely to lessen the risk to himself.

In accordance with this plan he sent his signal echoing through the canyon, then, with the exclamation: "We shall see!" drew back a pace and quickly folded his arms, an ugly grin parting his bearded lips.

Neither he nor his companions in crime made any attempt to draw or use a weapon, but confined themselves for the nonce to watching narrowly each movement on the part of Hunki Hans and the girl.

"Krautvine, yer hev tackled a hefty ole job this time, sure's ye're a foot high!" jeeringly observed Wheezy Ben, after a moment of silence.

"Yaw; dot vos all right, mine tear frient!" responded the Teuton, from his position at the side of the girl; "but vat you do apoud id, hey?"

"Do!—do nothin'!" retorted Ugly Mike, in well-feigned disgust. "Ef thet sweet pink ov a gal are fool enuff ter desert her present pertecers an' trust herself in ther hands ov sech a overgrow'd hunk ov p'izen wickedness an' deceit es yer ugly mug shows yer ter be, we hain't got nothin' ter say. Hies we, pards?"

"Nothin' a' tall!" chorused the two ruffians, grinning broadly at the supposed facetiousness of their leader.

"Protectors! Abductors, you mean!" cried the girl, her black eyes flashing angrily.

"Oh! Lawd! Jest listen at thet!" groaned Wheezy Ben, raising his hands and slowly rolling his eyes in mock horror. "Did yer ever hear tell ov sech depravity?"

"Never!" sighed Pious Pete. "So young, so luv'ly, an' yit so worldly! Werily, she hev strayed from ther flock!"

Amazed at this bit of audacious impudence on the part of the three roughs, the girl stared at them a moment, then turned abruptly to Hunki Hans.

"They are a trio of cowardly ruffians!" she exclaimed, indignantly. "The fleshy rascal—the fellow in the middle there—decoyed me from camp with a cooked-up story to the effect that my brother, the so-called alcalde had been shot and was dying out here in the hills."

"In return for the treacherous trick, with your assistance I will march them back to camp, where they shall receive a portion at least of the punishment they so richly merit."

"Yaw; t'ey vas a lot uf gowardly poogers, enyway, and pack to der gamp t'ey must go," coincided Hunki Hans, a vicious sparkle showing in his mild blue eyes. "Py chimminetti! der foot uf King Gabe vas pound to make t'em vellers sore sometimes, hey?"

"Heur w'at ther base villyuns perposes!" roared Ugly Mike, tragically, giving his arms a frantic fling. "Heur! oh, heur! my feller sufferers, an' tell me ef it are ter be or not ter be?"

"Down with ther foreign invader!" shrieked Wheezy Ben, his eyes 'in fine frenzy rolling,' a broad grin hovering over his oily countenance.

"Guv me liberty or guv me whisky." "W'y stand we here idle?" exclaimed Pious Pete, oracularly. "Ter avoid punishment unbecomin' galoots ov our cloth, we must fly—flee in flight, fer he who runs away may live ter fight a gin cocktail sum other day!"

"This idiotic nonsense is to gain time," declared the girl to her corpulent rescuer in a low tone, keeping her eyes on the ruffians disdainfully. "The whistle sounded by the one with the red beard was a signal for help from some quarter. Whatever is to be done must be done quickly. If the feat can in any way be accomplished, we should take the trio into camp, for there is some motive for this bold act."

Hunki Hans nodded assent, and in a voice

scarcely above a whisper spoke hurriedly for a full minute.

"Stop all dat foolishin', you vellers," he exclaimed, sternly, addressing Ugly Mike and his allies. "I am gomin' to dake you brisoners. Chust geep your hants oop und pe shtill mit you all, or I vill shoot und der young lady likewise. Oof you dry to run away, or make a fight, you will fint yourselfs tead mit no goflins py, py donder!"

At these words, a dark scowl flitted over the face of Ugly Mike. That Hunki Hans might attempt anything more than the rescue of the girl was an idea which had not even remotely occurred to the cunning ruffian.

Darting a swift glance up the canyon, he ground out a savage oath between his hard-set teeth, and in a scarcely audible voice muttered:

"Pards, we hev played ther fool in lettin' 'em git ther drop on us. They hev us lined ter kill, an' they mean ter shoot ef we lifts a finger. Ef ther cussed dogs don't kem, the game are up with us."

"It makes one feel amazin' sick," remarked Wheezy Ben, as the strange pair moved slowly forward. "So far as I kin see, we hev put our foot in it, an' ther next thing we knows we'll be gettin' our necks in a noose. Oh! we hev no show at all; even ther leetle gal are a puffet whirly-gnat ov sand."

An odd smile played around the mouth of the girl as the cautiously uttered words reached her ears.

"Put out your hands—empty!" she exclaimed, sharply, halting within a yard of the obese rough.

For a moment Wheezy Ben hesitated, then sullenly complied. In the girl's flashing eyes, in the muzzles of the dainty revolvers she held so steadily, there was a persuasive force not to be lightly resisted.

No sooner were the hands of the ruffian extended than Hunki Hans, with a single deft movement, drew from the pocket of his tattered coat and snapped around the waiting wrists a pair of glistening steel handcuffs!

At sight of the manacles the consternation of the three desperadoes knew no bounds.

"An ossifer, by ther Lawd!" woefully groaned Wheezy Ben.

"Exactly—not a Dutch tramp, but a member of the Rocky Mountain Detectives' Association," responded Hunki Hans, coolly, his voice and accent changing as if by magic.

"Handcuffs! A detective! Now we's in fer it, sure, pards," muttered Pious Pete, his cadaverous visage a picture of dismay.

"You have predicted aright, my prophetic friend," and with the declaration the speaker brought into view a second pair of handcuffs, with which Pious Pete was at once secured.

During the moment consumed in ironing his two allies, Ugly Mike remained silent, rage and chagrin plainly showing in his distorted face.

"Dern my cats! ef this hyar hain't a measly mean deal—a cold-blooded outrage!" he growled, as the detective confronted him.

"Have your own way about that. The only thing I require of you is a complete surrender. A galoot of about your size and build is pretty badly wanted just now over in Southwestern Colorado."

"Do you twig, Canyon Kit?"

The detective's words brought a sudden blaze of desperation into the eyes of the chief of the Cripples. Glaring fiercely at the man whom he now recognized as an implacable foe, he seemed at the point of risking life and limb in a bold dash for liberty.

But the revolvers in the hands of the undaunted girl still bore full upon his breast, and with a bitter snarl he covered back, wholly unrevved.

"It's no use kickin' ag'in' 'you, Bolly Dorrit—I cave," he muttered, sullenly. "But I'd jest like ter know how on airth yer kem ter stumble on ter ther hidden trail ov ther Canyon Scourges."

"An accident, Kit—merely an accident," laughed the detective. "I freely admit that it was only by chance that I penetrated your disguise, although I was on the lookout for you. There is a vast difference between Ugly Mike and his Cripples and Canyon Kit and his band of daring road-agents."

"But since a hitherto adverse fate has so kindly placed you in my power, I am fully inclined to profit by my accidental discovery. It was only an hour ago, while you and your two allies here were plotting the abduction of this young lady, that I overheard enough to open my eyes to your true character. Circumstances prevented my blocking your bold scheme, but I was close behind your tool and his unsuspecting victim all the way here."

"And I came provided for just such an emergency as the present. Here is my third and last pair of bracelets. Extend your wrists until I satiate your desire for jewelry."

Ugly Mike, as we shall continue to know him, slowly raised his hands, then drew back sharply as a peculiar sound reached his ears.

The next instant, he uttered a mocking laugh, in which he was joined by his manacled allies.

The detective and his fair companion retreated a trifle, their faces showing surprise if not alarm.

"Sorry, Bolly, but I really can't obleege yer to-day," gleefully exclaimed the chief, as a full pack of gaunt, heavy-jawed, ugly-looking dogs, sweeping down the canyon, crouched whining at his feet, their tails restlessly whipping the earth, their fierce, bloodshot eyes fixed intently upon the detective.

"It's not beca'se I don't want ter help yer along, Bolly Dorrit, but beca'se my friends hyar won't allow it," cautioned the ruffian. "An' Bolly, they're ther best friends a pore hunted devil ever had, I reckon—four-footed friends, wot can't be bought ter play me false."

"Up, good dogs, an' at him!"

With a series of deep-toned growls, the well-trained pack, ignoring the girl, sprung straight at the throat of the detective.

Startled beyond measure, for a brief moment, by the terrible peril with which he was menaced, Hunki Hans swiftly drew back, barely escaping the fangs of the leaders of the pack. Only for the briefest space possible was he irresolute.

Circling agilely about, now advancing, again retreating, working his revolvers with wondrous celerity and certainty, he executed each move with the promptness and decision of a thoroughly brave man fighting for life.

And in this extreme emergency the alcalde's sister likewise showed remarkable courage, her revolvers exploding rapidly and with an effect decidedly deadly to the pack of bloodthirsty brutes.

"Oho! oho!" roared Ugly Mike, in ferocious glee. "Tear him, ye dogs—tear him, ter ribbons!"

"Shoot ther cussed spotter an' putt an cend ter ther racket," suggested Pious Pete, uneasily.

"Shoot nothin'!" savagely returned the chief. "Long ago I swore that ef ever I caught Bolly Dorrit, ther scourge ov ther Scourges, he should be torn ter pieces by ther wild dogs ov ther band."

"Then stop ther gal, or thar won't be a purp left," muttered Wheezy Ben, sulkily. "So far es I kin see, she are slayin' more ov ther critters than ther man-hunter."

The truth of the obese ruffian's words was manifest to Ugly Mike. With a single swift bound he reached the unwary girl, and struck the weapons from her hands. The next instant she was struggling in his short, powerful arms.

A piercing scream apprised the detective of her peril; but, torn and bleeding, hemmed in by the snapping, snarling, leaping brutes, he was powerless to aid her, even in the least.

"Keep the critters at work—I'm goin' ter putt ther leetle angel away," cried Ugly Mike, sharply, as he rapidly moved off up the canyon.

Fascinated by the terrible struggle in progress before them, the manacled outlaws made no response beyond a surly growl.

His revolvers empty and useless at last, the closely pressed detective, with the pack—diminished in size but still ravenously fierce—in full cry at his heels, fled down the canyon, staggering blindly as he ran.

"Ther bloke are fightin' ag'in' fate," observed Wheezy Ben, his voice teeming with grim satisfaction. "He might 'a' know'd better'n ter tackle three sech rustlers es us, enyway."

"Right yer are, yer fat fraud," cried Pious Pete, jocularly. "Ef we c'u'd on'y git rid ov these bracelets now, wot a time—Oho! he are down at last!"

At these words the desperado eagerly started forward, his usually saturnine visage aglow with malevolent satisfaction; for, slipping in the coze which in places covered the bottom of the canyon, the luckless detective had fallen heavily upon his face, to be instantly set upon by the gaunt, powerful dogs, eager to rend him into fragments.

CHAPTER XI.

A MADMAN'S WORK.

WHEN the giant of the golden locks abruptly wheeled and confronted the dark Hercules, it was quite plain to the men on the horseshoe plateau that the most eventful day in the history

of the gold camp had been ushered in with the rising of that morning's sun.

There was an immediate massing of the opposing factions; on every side belts were drawn tight, and hands dropped instinctively upon protruding revolver-butts.

For a moment, the rival giants faced each other in dead silence, the eyes of each aflame with seeming hate and anger.

Then Gold Gabe spoke, in his deep-toned voice, his superb figure swaying lightly to and fro as if he was upon the point of hurling himself full against the man from Cinnabar.

"What do you mean by this meddling interference, Bummer Bob?" he demanded, the lurid glow in his blue eyes deepening. "Who asked you to thrust your carcass between me and Julian St. Elmo?"

"Touch me gently, you mogul of fraud and deceit," returned the dark giant, the words falling slowly and deliberately from between his hard-set teeth. "It is the duty of every honest man, be he large or small, to use every possible effort to prevent bloodshed; and, if he fails and an unprovoked murder is done, it is then his duty to see that justice gets her due—that the dead is avenged.

"And this latter is exactly what I intended to do. On two occasions you have foully murdered your men; first, Monterey Merle, whom you assassinated in the dead of night for the sake of a few ounces of gold; now, under a shallow subterfuge fetched up to conceal your real motive, you have spilled the blood from the veins of this lifeless lump of clay at our feet.

"Such a crime as this last cannot go unavenged, even in this mountain fastness of the Territory. The law, and the law's executives, are unknown in the camp of Nowhar; but there is at hand the material out of which to create a tribunal that never fails to mete out due punishment to the criminal—a tribunal more to be dreaded by the ruthless breaker of laws human and divine than the most carefully organized court of justice in the land—a tribunal, in a word, whose presiding officer is good Judge Lynch!

"You may well quail, Buzzard Bill, for you at last stand face to face with the doom I swore should be yours five long years ago, when on that fatal morning I came upon the cold, rigid corpse of Monterey Merle."

Then up from the closely massed followers of Julian St. Elmo arose yells and curses loud and bitter, accompanied with a restless surging portending a wild outbreak. Naught but the set, determined faces and ready weapons of the blonde giant's stanch friends held the worse element in check.

No trace of fear was to be seen in the face of the alcalde. On the contrary, a peculiar smile parted his full red lips, and his voice grew singularly soft and purring as he spoke:

"Upon my word! you do it well, Bob!" he exclaimed. "A vast improvement marks the ebbing of your life's sands. One hearing your tongue wag might well believe that a Member of Congress, in all his glory, with justice his one and only hobby, had suddenly flopped down into our humble midst.

"And yet your tragically eloquent slop-over is like a house built upon the shifting sands—it amounts to nothing, from the simple fact that its foundation is technically insecure.

"There may have been such a person as this Monterey Merle, and he may have been murdered; or the entire story may be but a freak of your imagination. Our only proof of such a murder is your word, and, so far as we know, your reputation for veracity is not worth an ounce of uncrushed quartz.

"As for the dainty sport here, he is no more dead than either you or I, unless he has died of sheer fright. Not a drop of his blood has been spilled—not so much as a hair of his head harmed.

"Had I sent my bullet crashing through his brain, instead of hurtling harmlessly through the air, not a man in all the camp would have declared the act murder when the whole truth had been laid bare; for full and just provocation existed—provocation so strong that even a tribunal of your idolized Judge Lynch would have held the killing as nothing more than a vindication of the very laws you regard so highly."

And then, to the apparently unutterable disgust of Shasta Sam, Julian St. Elmo slowly arose.

"Look for yourself, Bummer Bob!" cried the alcalde, mockingly. "Have I told the truth, or has the dead risen?"

And, as the unnerved gambler moved away crestfallen, furtively eying the now jeering

crowd, the giant of the golden locks darted a quick glance into the face of his rival—then:

"Halt! Julian St. Elmo. Not another step, or by the heavens above us! you shall die like the cursed coward you are, with your back to a foe!"

The ringing tones and words of the alcalde brought the gambler to bay; the second time within the hour Julian St. Elmo abruptly halted, his aspect one of uncontrollable fear.

Then, directly contrary to the expectations of the crowd, Shasta Sam, with a mocking bow, stepped aside, allowing the giant of the golden locks to stride unmolested toward his unnerved foe.

What passed between the two men was spoken in tones so low as not to be overheard, although there was eager listening.

At the expiration of five minutes the alcalde turned away from the gambler and walked over to the mock Yankee, with whom he exchanged a few words, then hastened across the plateau to the path leading down into the valley.

Left to himself, Julian St. Elmo skulked quickly out of sight around the curve of the horseshoe.

A fearful glance over his shoulder discovered no pursuit, nor to his strained hearing came the slightest sound which would indicate that he was being followed.

That the gambler was perfectly familiar with the ground he was traversing was obvious. Not the slightest hesitancy marked his movements as he left the level of the plateau and began a toilsome ascent of the mountain. Onward and upward, slowly and laboriously, he clambered, bending his course to the southward, until at the end of an hour he stood upon a narrow ledge overlooking the gold-camp far below.

"Accursed spot!" he muttered, through his set teeth, staring down, with a mad glow in his blue eyes, at the distant collection of rude habitations. "Never more shall I dare set foot within your bounds, for from this hour forth I am a hunted man!"

"There, in your narrow limits, I felt that I was almost safe—that the sleuth-hounds seeking my trail were forever at fault. Fool! fool that I was to delude myself, to remain and tempt inexorable fate!"

"With all my shrewdness, all my cunning, I have been fairly outmatched. From the advent of Ronald Morton, in the guise of Gold Gabe, until that moment when he faced me there on the plateau, with death in his mad eyes, I never suspected that the avenger was present in Nowhar. In that moment I realized the truth, though five years had wrought their changes in his appearance.

"Five years! Years of constant flight, of unceasing dread; years in which men have paid tribute to my bravery, even while I stood affrighted at my own shadow, while my heart quaked and stood still with fear!"

"I grew to fear and hate the giant as I never feared or hated man before; and yet, unheeding fate's unerring warning, I wondered at that fear and hatred, while I felt that we would be foes ever and always.

"Hired assassins have attempted his life, only to fail, one by one. Had I even dreamed the truth, his death would have been swift and sure, for with my own hand I would have slain him.

"Yet, during all the weeks in which we were thrown together, it did not occur to me that he was Ronald Morton, nor did he more than suspect until that terrible moment upon the plateau that he had at last found the man so long searched for. Then I could see that I had been tricked—could see by the red glow in his eyes that he at least partially realized the truth, and rather than again encounter him, I have taken to the wilds like a hunted beast.

"Curses upon the spot! Curses on all who linger there; be they friends or foes. Had I the power, now, in the bitterness of my humiliation and defeat, I would crush them all as I would crush a creeping, obnoxious spider.

"Ha! those dark specks moving through the camp are men gathering at the office of the Yellow Boy Mine. They are called together, no doubt, by Ronald Morton, to be sent over the hills and through the canyons in search of the missing girl.

"She is in my power, and never again shall the eyes of the avenging giant look upon her loving face. Crushed, defeated, driven at bay like a hunted hound though I am, yet shall I deal back blow for blow.

"Were the giant dead, and the events of this day blotted out, I would lay siege to the heart of the girl and win her for my wife, for since

that ill-starred day five years ago, her face has haunted me, sleeping and waking. She is beautiful as an houri, and rich. Again could I face the world, and bid defiance to that dread Nemesis, retribution."

Staring down the mountain-side, his eyes glowing with a deadly light, his voice, accentuated with bitterness, rising and falling fitfully, his aspect that of one with "a mind diseased," Julian St. Elmo stood until he had ended his soliloquy, then started back from the verge of the narrow ledge, a look of horror spreading over his pallid face.

"Why not?" he exclaimed aloud. "Why not? Curse them! would they not crush me?"

Then horror and hesitancy vanished, giving place to fiendish delight and deliberate action.

Hastening from the ledge, the gambler resumed his way up the mountain, ascending with rapidity and feverish strength invoked from his newly-formed purpose of evil.

Up the steep he toiled, never pausing, his eyes alert for the vantage point sought, the breath leaving his parched throat in short, sharp gasps, telling with voiceless eloquence of the terrible strain upon his endurance.

Upward, until the coveted point was gained, when a harsh, rasping laugh, escaping his bleeding lips, jarred weirdly on the brooding silence.

"They are doomed!" he cried shrilly, halting beside a great boulder overhanging the edge of a terrace, and peering down at the just discernible gold camp. "Their fate is in my hands! My humiliation shall be avenged! One stout push, and this monster stone will go thundering downward, with each mighty bound starting others in its train, and they others, until a resistless avalanche hurls itself upon the camp of Nowhar and blots it and all within it from existence.

"Weeks ago, when I discovered this hanging rock and warned them of its constant menace to the camp, they laughed and jeered at the idea of an avalanche. Now, when it is too late, they shall recall my words, and lament with shrieks and groans and curses!"

Again his elfish laugh rung out. With a swift bound, he threw himself behind the boulder, eager to put in execution his devilish design. In his madness, he seemed vested with the strength of three ordinary men. A hard-drawn breath, a powerful push, and over the edge of the terrace toppled the great rock, crashing downward on its mission of death.

True to his expectations, a constantly swelling volume of debris swept downward in the wake of the thundering boulder, the noise of its passage increasing in a moment from the sharp rattle of a few rolling stones to the dull roar of a mighty avalanche.

"Ha! ha! It is done! They are doomed men!" he shrieked, his voice rising high above the din, his blue eyes glittering with a strange, unnatural light, as he swung his arms violently to and fro. "Not a vestige of the camp will remain—not a man escape the avalanche of death to hound me down! No! no! buried beneath tons of rock and earth, all will lie still and voiceless till the crack of doom! I am safe! safe at last! Never more need Jason Dyke, the gambler and murderer, stand in dread of the gallows!"

"But why do I stand here? Away to the cavern and the girl; then farewell forever to this accursed spot!"

Turning abruptly, he strode away, shaping his course to the southward along the mountain-side.

For fully an hour, never once pausing to look back, he sped along as rapidly as the rugged nature of his pathway would permit, his brow knit in thought. At the expiration of that time, he halted upon the verge of an apparently bottomless canyon. After a sweeping glance around, to assure himself that he was not watched, he gave three short, sharp whistles, then threw himself flat on the earth.

A moment later, Ugly Mike, the chief of the Cripples, suddenly appeared, stepping out from the face of an apparently solid bluff a short distance up the canyon.

St. Elmo raised his head, and beckoned him to approach.

The desperado glided forward.

"W'ot on airth be yer doin' up hyar, Jule St. Elmo?" he exclaimed, in surprise.

"I came up to see how affairs were progressing," craftily replied the gambler. "You worked the trick with the girl, Mike?"

"We caged her, slick an' clean," and the ruffian sunk lazily to the ground.

"How'd ther duel kem out?"

"Dunkle was killed."

The reply was given at random, for whether

the hunchback desperado was dead or only wounded St. Elmo knew not.

"Sho! now; are that a fact? Yaas? Wal! wal! thar's no a'countin' fer ther things thet happen in this hyar wale ov tears," and Ugly Mike evolved a lugubrious sigh.

"Yaas, sur; sum' derved queer things do happen. Now, in snakin' ther gal out ov camp ther bull three ov us kem mighty nigh a-cashin' in our chips. Wheezy Ben wheedled her out ov Nowhar all right, an' got her safe inter ther canyon; but w'en we went ter lay han's on her, we found we hed miscalculated sum', fer she outs with a brace o' 'sixes' an' shows signs ov fight.

"Afore we c'u'd rekiver from our s'prise, inter ther canyon pops ther dirty fat cuss w'ot has bin passin' hisself off in camp es a Dutch tramp, an' atween 'em they got ther drop on us in ther wu'st way I ever see. Then ther two ov 'em sized et up thet they c'u'd take ther three ov us inter camp, ter be booted by King Gabe till we w'u'd tell who hed putt up ther leetle job on ther gal.

"I hed whistled fer ther purps, but afore they c'u'd git down from ther cave, ther Dutch son-ov-a-gun hed bracelets—bracelets, do yer mind—round ther wrists ov Pete an' Ben. In course thet took all ther starch out ov ther boyees, an' they wilted, wharupon ther fat cuss laughed an' let et out thet he war Bolly Dorrit, ov ther mountain detectives, an' thet he hed bin doin' sum purty tall listenin' round ther Fair Play, an' hed got on ter ther gal racket. W'ile he war blowin' away, ther purps kem down an' lit inter him, an' then thar war ther purtiest leetle scrimmage ever yer see.

"I see'd in a minute thet ther dorgs war goin' ter be too much fer Bolly, beka'se ther fat cuss c'u'dn't shake a leg fast enuff ter keep out ov ther way; so leavin' ther boyees ter watch ther fight, I grabbed the gal an' putt off fer ther cave, whar she now are.

"W'ile I war gone, ther dorgs downed Bolly, an' war jest a-makin' mince-meat ov him, w'en ther boyees heerd Jeems Rivers an' a pack ov galoots kem in lickety-split up ther canyon. Bein' as how they war han'cuffed an' in no fix fer a fight, they up an' cut fer ther cave, escapin' 'bout bein' see'd.

"Rivers an' his men cleaned out w'at war left ov ther pack, an' got Bolly stretched out more dead than alive, then went a-moseyin' up an' down the canyon lookin' fer our hidin'-place; but ther secret path leadin' up ter ther cave war too much fer 'em, an' so they finally up 'ith ther fat cuss an' putt back fer ther camp.

"Thet war purty nigh two hours ago; sence thet time thar hes bin no sign ov life in ther canyon."

Julian St. Elmo smiled grimly. He recalled the gathering at the office of the Yellow Boy Mine. He readily understood why there had been no signs of life in the canyon during the past hour.

"Ther job ov stealin' ther gal war a success," continued Ugly Mike. "But ther Cripples won't be see'd around Nowhar much arter this, fer King Gabe are a holy terror, an' he'll hev a rod in pickle fer ther boyees."

"Quite true," said St. Elmo, quietly, his long fingers toying nervously with the haft of the bowie in his belt. "You say Pete and Ben are in the cave?"

The chief nodded assent.

"Alone with the girl?"

"Yaas."

"Then who is that?" and the gambler, springing half-erect, pointed with the index finger of his left hand toward the cave.

Startled, Ugly Mike turned his head and glared in the direction indicated.

St. Elmo's knife flashed in the sunlight. A swift, downward stroke, and the long blade sunk to the hilt in the back of the tricked desperado.

"You, Jule St. Elmo—did you do thet?" he gasped, whirling over and staring with fast glazing eyes at the face of the treacherous gambler. "W'at hev I done thet you sh'u'd stab me in ther back? Cuss yer! hain't I sarved yer long an' well?"

"Dead men tell no tales!" quoth the mad homicide, and with the jeering response, the life of Ugly Mike ebbed rapidly away.

CHAPTER XII.

JESSICA RELATES A STORY.

"He has gone the way of all flesh," muttered St. Elmo, turning from the lifeless form of Ugly Mike, and moving cautiously toward the cavern. "All that now remains fer me to do to free myself of all entangling alliances, is to rid myself of Wheezy Ben and Pious Pete. Luckily

they are handcuffed, and with my revolvers in prime condition, the affair will be altogether one-sided.

"Adroitly performed, the act can be made to give me a hero's prestige in the eyes of the romantic girl, too; and, once in her good graces, I doubt not that I shall be perfectly competent to lay successful siege to her heart and hand.

"There is nothing like turning these little matters to account, for it is the trifles that count up and swell the total.

"Fortunately, the girl has not seen me since that day on which occurred our first and only meeting, and the change in my appearance is so marked that the chances are a hundred to one that she will never recognize me.

"After she is once Mrs. Jason Dyke, however, I don't care a picayune how quickly she opens her eyes to the real facts in the case. I think I can depend upon myself to see that no secrets go out of the family.

"But here is the cavern entrance. Now for a glimpse inside, then hol' for the bold, heroic dash!"

Perfectly familiar with the cave and its vicinity, the crafty villain had so arranged his approach as to remain unseen by any one chancing to look forth in quest of Ugly Mike.

The secret haunt was a roomy, well-lighted place, and the forms of its denizens were easily discerned by the gambler as he darted a single piercing look through the narrow, cunningly concealed aperture serving as an entrance.

At the rear end of the cavern, seated upon a large flat stone, her hands bound securely with a rough rawhide thong, and her head bowed down, was Jessica Morton, the blonde giant's sister.

Just within the entrance sat the two ruffians, side by side upon a narrow ledge, conversing in low tones, and anon regarding their manacled hands with rueful looks.

As St. Elmo noted the respective positions of the three persons, an evil smile curled his thin lips.

"I would not have it better," he thought. "A single leap, a brace of shots, a little artful rodomontade, and I shall be face to face with the fair charmer, and deep at one bound in her good graces."

Withdrawing from the strained position he had assumed, the gambler abruptly stepped before the narrow aperture in the rock, each hand clasping the butt of a weapon, his eyes glowing fiercely, his athletic form bent slightly forward, and his muscles bunched for a mighty bound.

An instant he swayed lightly back and forth, then shot forward with the ease and suppleness of a panther, alighting face to face with the brace of astounded ruffians.

"Hands up, or die!" he shouted, the words falling swiftly, his full tones filling the cavern with strange, ringing echoes. "What! you show fight! Then—take—it!"

The hiatuses between the last sharply hissed words were each filled with the crack of a revolver, and the two desperadoes, each with a bullet hole in the center of his forehead, fell lifeless upon the sandy bottom of the cave—killed before they could utter a word.

For a moment St. Elmo stood quite still, with his smoking weapons gracefully poised, his gleaming blue eyes peering into the darker corners of the cavern, and his bearing that of a man who expected an immediate and deadly attack.

"Can it be possible there were but three of them?" he ejaculated, the words just audible. "And the fair captive—where—is—Ah!"

With the exclamation, he deftly returned the revolvers to his belt, then glided forward, for the girl had started to her feet in evident alarm.

"A thousand pardons, miss, if I have startled you!" he murmured, bowing as he deferentially lifted his hat. "Prompt, decisive action was necessary, as it was evident that those two ruffians were bent upon making a desperate fight."

"An apology is not to be thought of," returned the girl, promptly. Then, with a peculiar smile hovering over her pallid face, she added: "The men were desperate fellows, and would have fought to the last, no doubt, handcuffed though they were."

"Handcuffed?"

The exclamation teemed with artfully simulated surprise and chagrin.

"Yes; they were handcuffed," repeated Jessica; then, in a few brief sentences she related the ironing of the two ruffians by Hunki Hans.

"It must have been that the glitter of the manacles misled me," mused the apparently crestfallen gambler, as if the words were intended for himself alone. "I was morally sure that

each had drawn a weapon. Then, too, I was expecting a determined resistance, for I had just headed a terrible struggle outside with the red-bearded member of the trio.

"I shall never excuse myself for my haste," he continued, aloud, addressing his words to the girl. "It is inexpressibly galling to a man of spirit to find that he has slain a comparatively helpless foe.

"But permit me to free your hands. And I dare say a glimpse of the outer world would be both agreeable and refreshing after your confinement in this noisome place."

Jessica Morton mutely extended her hands. Under the keen edge of St. Elmo's knife, the rawhide thong parted and fell away.

"Thank you," she said, quietly. Then, as she noted the interest glow in the gambler's eyes, her glance shifted, and a faint flush crept over her face.

Inwardly exultant at the successful working of the plot evolved from his crazed brain, St. Elmo turned and led the way from the cavern.

In passing the body of Wheezy Ben, the girl stooped and drew from his belt a heavy revolver, which she instantly concealed in the folds of her dress.

"How long have you been a captive in that den, Miss—Miss—"

"Miss Morton," supplied Jessica, as they emerged from the short passage. "I don't think I've been there more than two hours. I was enticed from Nowhar this morning.

"From Nowhar, you say? If you had friends in that camp, Miss Morton, I have sad news to impart," and the gambler's face assumed a serious expression.

"Sad news! Oh! what can it be?" cried the girl, sinking upon a rock, facing the canyon, and wringing her hands despairingly.

St. Elmo averted his face to conceal a look of triumph.

"If you had friends there, my dear Miss Morton, pray prepare yourself for news of terrible import," he said, with immeasurable gravity.

At that instant, the girl started sharply, and a look of great relief crept into her face.

"Friends!" she exclaimed almost impatiently, her face in turn eluding the gambler's glance. "The last of my kindred—my brothers—were there."

"Then, lady, I have for you the worst news possible.

"But little more than an hour ago, an awful avalanche swept down upon the fated camp, burying everything beneath tons of earth. Out of all Nowhar, not a man escaped! At last I—"

"At last you—have what?" interrogated Jessica sharply, wheeling and staring him full in the face.

St. Elmo hesitated, and bit his lip. His reeling brain had led him almost into making an irreparable blunder.

"At last I have discharged a disagreeable duty," he concluded.

"Oh! is thit all?" and a cold smile flitted over Jessica Morton's face.

The gambler was nonplused. He had expected a wild outburst of grief.

"But are you sure no one escaped from the doomed camp?" continued the girl.

"Positive," replied St. Elmo. "From a spur of the mountain overlooking the camp, I witnessed the descent of the avalanche. Not a man escaped. Many attempted to flee, only to be crushed beneath the mass of rock and earth."

A moment of silence ensued.

"How did you discover that I was a captive in the cave, Mr.—"

"Donald Clark, is my name—a tourist, tramping these hills for pleasure and adventure," said St. Elmo, seating himself on a rock. "In reply to your question: After the falling of the avalanche, I turned away, sick at heart, well-knowing that I could be of no assistance to the poor fellows buried in the valley below me. By chance, I laid my course in this direction, and again, by the merest accident, overheard a portion of the conversation of your captors. You know the result."

"My abduction this morning seems to have been a very fortunate circumstance, in some respects, Mr. Clark," observed Jessica, after a moment's thought. "At all events, it led to my escaping the avalanche."

"But now that I am alone in the world, how shall I ever get back to civilization?"

"I am at your service, dear lady," cried the gambler, bowing low. Mentally, he added: "And, hang me! if you ain't selfishness personified!"

The girl shot a covert glance at his face, while

her foot beat a restless tattoo against the rocks.

"Really, Mr. Clark, yours is a most generous and self-sacrificing nature!" she exclaimed, a scarcely perceptible tinge of irony spicing her words. "I dislike the idea of foisting myself upon your protection for an indefinite period, but I really don't see how I can reject your magnanimous offer, alone and helpless as I am."

"However, before the matter is definitely agreed upon, there are certain conditions surrounding my life that it is only right you should understand the circumstances, understand."

Again St. Elmo bowed.

"My name, as I told you, is Jessica Morton," continued the girl. "My father was Arzeno Morton, for many years a popular Mississippi steamboat captain, and I was born nineteen years ago, in one of the northern counties of the commonwealth of Kentucky."

"I had two brothers, Ronald and Henry, twins, some seven years older than myself. At my mother's death, when I was in my eighth year, these boys were sent away to school, while I was put under the care of a widowed aunt."

"A few months later, my father resigned his position, and went to California. There he remained four years, returning quite wealthy."

"He at once purchased a large plantation in my native county, and in a short time, through a series of fortunate speculations, more than doubled his fortune."

"His life thenceforth might have been one of ease, prosperity, and honor, for he ranked well in his community; but the fascinations and temptations of river life were strong upon him, and against his better judgment he made frequent excursions down the Mississippi."

"It was while with him, upon the last of these trips he was fated ever to make, that the tragic adventure destined to becloud my future life befell me."

"You are listening, Mr. Clark?"

"I am listening," replied St. Elmo, uneasily, his face filled with a strange pallor, and his shifting glance refusing to meet the steady, earnest gaze of the girl.

"On that particular trip," resumed Jessica, "there were an unusual number of professional gamblers aboard; and, as many of them were drinking heavily, trouble was freely predicted."

"Just above Natchez, despite my entreaties and protestations, my unfortunate father was persuaded to play by a gambler whose name, as I afterward learned, was Jason Dyke, and two others."

"Did you say something, Mr. Clark?"

"Go on! go on!" muttered St. Elmo. "I said it was an outrage."

"An outrage? Worse than that!" exclaimed the girl. "But to resume my story:

"Not half an hour had passed when loud words from this Jason Dyke attracted my attention to the group. In a moment I saw that serious trouble was imminent, for the three gamblers had sprung to their feet, and with drawn revolvers were confronting my father, who the next instant was shot down like a dog before my eyes."

"In the confusion that followed the three murderers made their escape from the boat; but graven deep upon the tablets of my memory was a never-fading, never-changing likeness of each."

"When my father had been consigned to the grave, my brothers and I, in the dead of night, registered a vow never to rest until the three cold-blooded slayers had been hunted down and handed over to justice."

"That was five years ago; since then two of the miscreants have expiated their many crimes. But one remains, and that one is Jason Dyke."

"For two years his trail was lost; then, in his tireless search, in his restless wanderings to and fro, Ronald here in Nowhar came upon a man in the person of Julian St. Elmo, who tallied almost exactly with my description of Jason Dyke."

"It has been my assertion that, at any time and under any circumstances, I would at a glance recognize the murderer; hence, to make sure that St. Elmo was the party wanted, brother Henry and myself were called here from Colorado, where we had been pursuing the search."

"Ronald's suspicions had been deeply aroused, and it was determined to guard against failure by every precaution possible."

"Therefore, Henry and myself, with two agents of the law, lay encamped a few miles below Nowhar for several days, until our plan of action had been fully and carefully mapped out."

"And it proved that the precaution was well taken; for, as Ronald had feared, I failed utter-

ly to recognize St. Elmo when, disguised as a man, I was taken into Nowhar and brought face to face with the villain."

"Time and art had wrought wondrous changes in his appearance."

"Back to the camp in the hills I went, and last night, in my proper person, with Henry and our two agents, again entered the gold-camp. Then, events over which we had no control, forced us to alter our plans; and now this avalanche renders an entire and radical change necessary, for I am determined that Jason Dyke, or Julian St. Elmo, shall yet pay the penalty of his many crimes."

As the girl concluded, she looked squarely into the eyes of the gambler, a deadly gleam showing in her own black orbs.

By a powerful effort St. Elmo had succeeded in bringing his nerves partially under control, and met the piercing gaze with comparative steadiness.

"I do not exactly understand you, Miss Morton," he began, with cool assurance. "Your chase is surely ended, for, if this Dyke, or St. Elmo, was in Nowhar this morning, he is now beyond the reach of all earthly vengeance."

"He was not in the camp when the avalanche fell," sharply responded the girl, rising to her feet. "Nor is he beyond the reach of earthly vengeance."

"I know you at last, Jason Dyke! Surrender, or you die!"

On a level with his heart she held the revolver slipped from the belt of Wheezy Ben, and in her voice there was a ring of deadly determination.

St. Elmo laughed outright.

"Why, this is the spiciest little scene I have taken part in for a long while," he declared.

"That is a dangerous weapon you have, my dear Jessica, and you hold it well; but if you will take the trouble to lower your glance just a trifle, you will see that two are playing at that game."

"I saw whither you were drifting, and, woman though you are, I took the precaution to get your angelic form under the muzzles of my weapons, for I confess to a strong antipathy to dying by the hand of a half-crazed girl."

"Drop your weapon, and sit down, and we will talk the matter over like rational creatures."

"You are now alone in the world, and here in this mountainous solitude are completely at my mercy."

"I admit that you have found a true bill against me, so far as that unfortunate affair of five years ago is concerned; but I am inclined to be reasonable and forbearing, and I have a proposition to submit."

"What I have to propose is, that you become Mrs. Jason Dyke. The ladies whom I would honor with such a proposal are not many. Duly considered, it is a magnanimous proposition."

"Come, now, what do you say?"

The girl made no answer; her black eyes blazed steadily at the mocking face of her tormentor.

A shadow fell across the parched earth at the gambler's feet, another Herculean form bent swiftly over him, and a pair of strong hands closed about his slender wrists in a gripe of steel.

"Don't you think your proposal just a little premature, dainty sport?" interpolated a stern voice.

Slipping from the rock, St. Elmo faced his captor.

"Gold Gabe, by the eternal!" he shrieked.

CHAPTER XIII.

CONCLUSION.

HAD a bolt from heaven descended, the half-crazed gambler could not have been more terribly astounded.

"I reckon you have called the turn," grimly returned the giant of the golden locks, as he deftly disarmed St. Elmo.

Released from the vise-like grip of the giant, the gambler stared around like one dazed.

"Oho! oho!" he suddenly cried, a dash of hope appearing in his face. "The battle is not ended yet, for here is Shasta Sam, your sworn foe!"

The dark Hercules slowly advanced, a deadly smile playing about his red lips.

"Nay, Jason Dyke, the play is done—the farce is ended," he cried. "Sooner than harm one hair of Ronald Morton's head, I would hurl your worthless carcass to the bottom of yonder canyon. Know ye, murderous wretch, that blood is thicker than water—that we rival giants are twin brothers!"

"Know ye, that from the moment I appeared in Nowhar Ronald and I were in secret league to wrest from you the secret of your identity;

that, on the plateau, by a move of my arm, I warned Trotter of the course about to be pursued by your faithful ally, the hunchback; that on the plateau, by means of a written message, I again warned Ronald of Jessica's abduction; that Trotter and myself followed you up the mountain-side, to find where you had her concealed, and in so doing witnessed your starting of the avalanche, and the cowardly assassination of Ugly Mike."

"Know ye, that your red race is run—that the end is here!"

As the dark Hercules ended, Gold Gabe stepped forward.

"At last you are defeated at every turn, Jason Dyke," he said, speaking slowly. "Your doom is at hand; but before you go to meet your Maker, there are a few things I want you to know."

"I want you to know that Hump Dunkle, your only really faithful ally and confidant, has made a clean breast of everything—of the plot to assassinate me at the Fair Play last night and of the fact that Truthful Joe's statement there was a tissue of falsehoods."

"I want you to know that the avalanche started down the mountain by you to crush out the gold-camp and the men in it was a grand fiasco—that of all the camp the hunchback and Faro Frank were the only men killed."

And with a mocking bow the giant of the golden locks drew back.

Then, as Jonathan Trotter stepped into view, Jessica arose and glided forward.

"Mr. Dyke," she exclaimed, "it is but due you that you should have an answer to your magnanimous proposal for my hand. As brief and pointed a reply as I can give is to introduce you to my husband."

"Mr. Jason Dyke, Mr. Jonathan Trotter, otherwise Mr. Eldridge Gerry, of Denver."

The bogus Yankee bowed with studied politeness.

Through it all Jason Dyke stood like a hunted beast brought to bay.

At a sharp word from the blonde giant Nowhar's entire population appeared, passing up from the canyon by the secret path used by Ugly Mike and his Cripples.

For a moment the doomed wretch staggered blindly, then clinched his hands and with a wild yell dashed straight toward the yawning chasm.

A cry of horror went up from the rapidly assembling miners, and amid the rush that followed fifty pairs of hands were outstretched to seize St. Elmo.

Too late; crouching for an instant on the very verge of the canyon, the maddened wretch cast a swift glance over his shoulder, then with an elfish scream leaped far out into the abyss.

The crowd stood appalled. There could be but one end to that leap—death, quick and terrible.

Verily, the giant avengers had followed the trail to the bitter end.

A few words more, and the end is reached.

The dead gambler was buried in the canyon in which he met his grim and tragic fate.

The next day the giant brothers, their sister and her husband, together with the wounded Bolly Dorrit, left the gold-camp of Nowhar forever, the "alcalde" turning over to the faithful Jeems Rivers, the Yellow Boy Mine.

THE END.

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